



Power and Women in Southeast and Central Europe in Late Medieval and Early Modern Period (1300-1600)

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NUNS ON THE THRONE: QUEEN JELENA AND PRINCESS MILICA

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I. Introduction

In the early 20th century, increased interest in women's history opened the door to the examination of a wide array of information that had long been outside the scope of interest for historical research. However, even then, in both international and local Balkan historiography, investigating women's political, social, and economic

* Senior Research Associate (Institute of History Belgrade), Serbia.

power was rarely a primary topic of research until the end of the last century, when it began gaining momentum. In contrast to earlier, deeply rooted thinking based on the perception of women that existed in the modern period, analyses of this information produced conclusions that had been previously unimaginable. It revealed that, depending on the milieu in which they found themselves, women could not only rule but also have far more real power than had been previously assumed.¹ Despite an incredibly vast number of surviving sources, at first glance, women in Byzantium seemed to have been “silent,” but in fact they participated in the division of power, some of them distinguished themselves in particular due to their legal status and skill at governance.² Except for in the Holy Roman Empire, France, and the Papal States, throughout the European continent, there were also several female rulers and a right to inherit the throne through the female line.³

A particular issue for this research is the use of modern terminology that does not necessarily indicate a particular woman’s true status. Terms such as queen consort, queen dowager (the widow of a king), queen mother (a queen dowager who is also the mother of a reigning ruler), queen regnant, queenship, and co-rulership must be used very

¹ A. Fostikov, “Žena - između vrline i greha”, in *Privatni život u srpskim zemljama srednjeg veka*, prir. Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, Danica Popović (Beograd: Clio, 2004), 323-324 [“Woman - between virtue and sin”, in *Private life in the Serbian lands in the Middle Ages*]; J. Mrgić and A. Fostikov, “Ženski glasovi Bosanskog kraljevstva na primeru dve Jelene – Jelene (Grube) i Jelene Nelipčić”, in *Srpska kraljevstva u Srednjem veku*, ur. Siniša Mišić (Beograd : Centar za istorijsku geografiju i istorijsku demografiju Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta; Novi Sad : Filozofski fakultet, Odsek za istoriju; Niš : Centar za vizantijsko-slovenske studije; Kraljevo : Grad Kraljevo, 2017), 381-399 [Female voices of the Bosnian kingdom on the example of two Jelenas - Jelena (Grube) and Jelena Nelipčić]; A. Fostikov, “Craftswomen in Medieval Serbia: A Comparative View,” *Istraživanja – Journal of Historical Researches* 35 (2024): 69-70. For the history of historiography about women and power, with special attention to queens and queenships in Europe, see: A. Bárány, “Medieval Queens and Queenship: the Present Status of Research in Income and Power,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU* 19 (2013): 149-199.

² A. Atanasovski, “Molkot na ženite vo Vizantija pomegju kanonite i realnosta,” *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet/The Annual of the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje* 69 (2016):73-86 [The silence of women in Byzantium between canonical provisions and reality].

³ William Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), XIII.

carefully and with precise clarifications in individual cases.⁴ The status of queen regent is a specific case that could mean the right to rule *de jure* but also with *de facto* power, and in some cases, if the heir was very young, it could even include an extended period on the throne.⁵ The lack of sources may sometimes hinder defining each of them in relation to a particular term or status, but based on a variety of information, women in medieval Serbian lands, whether they were women rulers, widows, or mothers of rulers, could often be found holding their own courts or sharing provinces in which they had all the prerogatives of rulership. Some even became co-rulers.⁶ Furthermore,

⁴ The problematic use of the English term “queen” is highlighted in the historiography of women rulers. It exclusively denotes the wife of a king, and there is no legal counterpart to the term “king” that indicates she is sovereign. Because some other languages also do not have a specific term for a woman ruler, there are cases of women using the male form of the title and are referred to in the literature as kings. William Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings*, XIII–XVI. Unlike other European languages, in Slavic languages, the word for queen (*kraljica*), can mean both the wife of the ruler and a ruling queen. It is the feminine form of the word for king (*kralj*) and shares the same root (*kralj-ica*).

⁵ Princess Milica, the wife of Prince Lazar, is a striking example of rule through the institution of regency. M. Blagojević, “Savladarstvo u srpskim zemljama posle smrti cara Uroša,” *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 21 (1982): 183–212 [“Co-rule in Serbia after the Death of Emperor Uros”]; A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, “Jevgenija monahinja kneginja,” in *Vlast i moć – vlastela Moravske Srbije od 1365. do 1402. godine*, ed. Siniša Mišić (Beograd: Centar za istorijsku geografiju i istorijsku demografiju Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu, Kruševac: Narodni muzej Kruševac, 2014), 171–182. [“Jevgenija Abbess-Princess.” In *Sovereignty and power: the nobility of the Moravska Serbia from 1365 to 1402*].

⁶ Most often in dynasties such as the Nemanjić dynasty, direct inheritance of the throne through male primogeniture was often one of the reasons for a widowed queen to become not just the queen mother but also the head of the entire house as *mater familiaris*, and for her to serve as an intermediary when needed. Widowed queens also administered their own provinces. Specific examples of this are Helene d’Anjou, the wife of King Stefan Uroš and Empress Jelena, the wife of Emperor Dušan, with the latter also acting independently as a co-ruler and sovereign. The same principle has also been found among the families of the *gospodars* and nobles, so it was not rare for a mother to issue charters as a widow together with the heirs. G. Subotić, “Kraljica Jelena Anžuska – ktitor crkvenih spomenika u Primorju,” *Istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1958): 131–147 [Queen Helene d’Anjou - ktitor of church monuments in Primorje]; M. Blagojević, “Srpske vladarke - ktitori Hilandara,” *Hilandarski zbornik* 11(2004): 19-21. [Serbian women-rulers-patrons of Hilandar]; N. Porčić, “Marija, sestra srpske kraljice Jelene,” *Istorijski časopis* 70 (2021): 31–68 [Mary, the sister of queen Helen of Serbia]; Georgije Ostrogorski, *Serska oblast posle Dušanove smrti* (Beograd, 1965), 1-20 [The state

despite the medieval Serbian throne, power, and even territory passing through the male line, some examples clearly demonstrate the rights of women in the absence of male heirs, and that women's bloodlines also allowed the family not only a particular social status, but also the right to inherit and a strong claim in a potential struggle for the throne.⁷

Despite a global lack of sources, even the few sources that have survived demonstrate the status, power, and authority of women in South Slavic lands, and especially in the lands of medieval Serbia. The diplomatic sources that name a number of women who issued charters, either independently or with their husbands or sons, are particularly significant and attest to their political power. Information about these women also comes from narrative sources, including hagiographies and artistic representations, but physical objects are a specific source related to rulership, and in particular, a series of coins issued by women, either independently or together with another male representative of their house. As has already been pointed out in the literature, issuing one's own currency was the right of rulers and *gospodars*, and in the case of women clearly shows their connection with power.⁸

Although there are examples of women governing their own provinces even before the end of the late Middle Ages, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in particular, saw women ruling over medieval Serbian lands. They were primarily widows who appeared as the head of houses, be they royal, *gospodar*, or noble. Despite none of them being officially declared the only and absolute ruler (with the exception of Jelena Gruba in neighboring Bosnia, who was also a queen regent

of the Ser after the death of the Dusan]; M. Blagojević, *Savladarstvo*, 183—212; A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, *Jevgenija*, 171—182.

⁷ Among other things, Vladislav, son of King Dragutin, claimed the right to the Hungarian throne and lands through his marriage to Constanza Morosini, while some nobles claimed their right to the Nemanjić lineage through marriage ties with women from another branch. A. Fostikov and N. Isailović, “Ugovor o veridbi Vladislava II Nemanjića i Konstance Morozini,” *Mešovita grada -Miscellanea* 39 (2018): 27—28 [The betrothal contract between Vladislav (II) Nemanjić and Constanza Morosini]; Dejan Ječmenica, *Nemanjići drugog reda* (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta, 2018), *passim* [*The Nemanjićs of the second order*].

⁸ William Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings*, 28-29; M. Blagojević, *Savladarstvo*, 183—212. In medieval Serbia, this is confirmed by currency issued by Empress Jelena, wife of King Dušan, and Queen Jelena, wife of King Vukašin. Vujadin Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo srednjovekovne Srbije* (Beograd, 2001), 141-142, 159 [*Serbian Medieval Coinage*].

despite being a widow⁹), several of them acted as regents or co-rulers, or were participants in shared family power, and they were officially recognized in these positions. After the death of Emperor Dušan and two major battles—the Battle of Marica (1371) and the Battle of Kosovo (1389)—that took place less than two decades of each other and claimed the last of the male political representatives, four widows emerged who played important roles in politics and diplomacy in southeastern Europe, the borders and appearance of which were altered by Ottoman penetration into the southern regions, and which took place alongside the collapse of the Serbian empire and the disappearance of the hereditary line of the Nemanjić dynasty.¹⁰ Of these four, three were named Jelena: Empress Jelena/the nun Jelisaveta, wife and widow of Emperor Dušan; Queen Jelena/the nun Jelisaveta, wife and widow of King Vukašin; and Despot Jelena/the nun Jefimija Jevpraksija, wife and widow of Despot Jovan Uglješa. The fourth was Princess Milica/the nun Jevgenija, wife and widow of Prince Lazar and later Princess Jevgenija. Three of them were immortalized in epic poetry, and one, Jefimija, was herself a poet.¹¹

Despite all four taking monastic vows after the deaths of their husbands as custom dictated,¹² three continued to participate in government and secular rule. These were Empress Jelena, Queen

⁹ A. Fostikov, “Jelena Gruba, bosanska kraljica. Bosna krajem 14. veka (1395-1399),” *Branicevski glasnik* 3-4 (2006): 29-50. [“Jelena Gruba, the Bosnian queen. Bosnia at the end of the 14th century (1395-1399), *Branicevo herald* 3-4]; J. Mrgić and A. Fostikov, *Ženski glasovi*, 390-392.

¹⁰ For more on political events and centripetal forces in the empire during this period, see: Rade Mihaljčić, *Kraj Srpskog carstva* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1975) [*The end of the Serbian Empire*]; M. Gogić, “Rimokatolička župa Novog Brda u kasnom srednjem vijeku”, *Radovi Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Zadru* 58 (2016): 16-22 [“The Romanic Catholic parish of Novo Brdo in late-mediaeval period”]

¹¹ For more on Jefimija, see: L. Juhas-Georgievska, “Književno delo monahinje Jefimije,” *Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik* 50, 1-2 (2002): 57-70 [“The literary work of the nun Yefimija”]; S. Tomin, “Bibliografija radova o monahinji Jefimiji (oko 1349 – 1405),” *Knjiženstvo* 2 (2012): 222-256 [“Bibliography of Texts about Nun Jefimija (1349-1405)”]. For other figures, see below in more detail.

¹² Taking monastic vows was used as a means of removing potential rulers (men and women) from secular life, because monastics of both sexes could not be officially crowned. However, as the examples here clearly show, this did not prevent them from either continuing to rule or from retaining secular power.

Jelena, and Princess Milica.¹³ Based on the sources, we know that after they took their vows, two of them—Queen Jelena and Princess Milica—added their monastic title to their secular title and used a dual titular name for formal occasions. Evidence exists in surviving records that the nun Milica/Jevgenija, whose title was Nun Princess, was referred to in her superscription as Princess Nun, and Queen Jelena/Jelisaveta was referred to as Queen Nun in both contemporary and later sources. Regarding Empress Jelena, however, although there is no confirmation in the sources, it is incontrovertible that after she took her monastic vows (sometime before May 1356), she was referred to in one instance as empress and in another concurrently as a nun.

Although there are examples of extended secular titles from outside of the Balkans through the addition of the word *abbatissa* (abbess), within the region, there are no examples beyond these two, or at least

¹³ Although Empress Jelena recognized the sovereignty of her son Emperor Uroš, she ruled over Serbian lands independently until 1470s at the latest. Due to the situation regarding the heir, Emperor Uroš, her position in her last years in the rest of the empire can be likened that of a queen mother and silent co-ruler. She confirmed this role through a co-rulership with King Vukašin. Georgije Ostrogorski, *Serska oblast*, 3-6 n.17, 87-89, 91, 134 n.30; Rade Mihaljčić, *Kraj srpskog carstva*, 25, 57-60, 138; A. Atanasovski, “Početocite na Serskata država na čelo so carica Elena,” *Godišen zbornik na Filozofski fakultet- Skopje* 55 (2002): 125-135 [The beginning of the state of Ser with Elena as empress]. In addition to issuing currency with her son, Emperor Uroš, and then with King Vukašin, it should be noted that at an earlier time she might have been something similar to a co-ruler judging by the *ketor* portrait in the Poloski Monastery of Saint George, in which Christ Emmanuel places a crown on her head indirectly through angels, and by the fact that her name and title as queen are written in red in her husband’s charter. Đ. Bubalo, “Falsifikovana povelja cara Stefana Uroša o Stonskom dohotku,” *Stari srpski arhiv* 2 (2003): 124-126 n. 48, sa osvтом na stariju literature po pitanju novca [“The falsified charter of Emperor Stefan Uroš on the income of Ston”]; D. Živojinović, “Velika prilepska hrisovulja cara Stefana Dušana karejskoj keliji Svetog Save (Hil. 149),” *Stari srpski arhiv* 7 (2008): 72; Aleksandra Šutinowska Belčurovska, *Materijalnata kultura vo ktitorskite pretstavi vo freskoživopisot na Srednovekovna Makedonija (kostimi, nakit, oružje, arhitektonski repliki)* (Skopje: Univerzitet „Sv. Kiril i Metodij”– Skopje Filozofski fakultet; Institut za istorija na umetnosta i arheologija, 2022, Master’s thesis), 106-107 [Material culture in the creative representations in the fresco paintings of Medieval Macedonia (costumes, jewelry, weapons, architectural replicas)]. On the Significance of Red Letters. N. Porčić, “‘Carske šare crvene’: o zastupljenosti i obrascima upotrebe crvenog mastila u dokumentima Nemanjića,” [“‘Lines of Royal Red’: On the Presence and Patterns of Use of Red Ink in Nemanjid Documents”], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* LIII, (2016): 255-273.

no confirmed examples of this sort of dual titulature, and especially for women and in cases of women regents. For women who fulfilled not just the role of regent but also held their own courts and had political power and influence, the use of this supplement as an addition to a secular title is important information that indicates their rule at a particular point was real and not just a formality.¹⁴ However, comparing mentions of this additional title and drawing some parallels, it is necessary to at least briefly consider what information is not available, although it is disproportionate in number. There are many more known sources for Milica/Jevgenija, including documents she herself issued and a large number of works within historiography. However, almost nothing is known about Queen Jelena/Jelisaveta, not only because the entire archive of the Mrnjavčević house in Macedonia has been lost, but also because, to date, there has not been a single study of her.¹⁵ Thus, in order to understand the historical circumstances at a given time, it is necessary to first consider what basic information there is about these two nuns/rulers.

¹⁴ Đ. Bubalo, Falsifikovana povelja, 124-126; A. Fostikov, "Povelja monahinje kneginje Jevgenije manastiru Velikoj Lavri Sv. Atanasija na Svetoj Gori," ["The charter of the nun Princess Eugenia to the monastery of the Great Lavra of St. Athanasius on Mount Athos"], *Inicijal. Časopis za srednjovekovne studije* 10 (2022): 151-168. However, it should be noted that in the Bigorski beadroll, Empress Jelena is referred to as the empress nun Jevgenija. Of the many women in the book, only two have dual titles: Empress Jelena and Queen Jelena. The rest are exclusively referred to as nuns. N. Celakoski, "Najstariot pomenik na Bigorskiot manastir," [The oldest beadroll of Bigor monastery], *Spomenik SANU, odeljenje istorijskih nauka* 7 (1992): 226, 232 n. 54 i table 6 i 7., Empress Jelena is also recorded under the names Jevgenija and Jelisaveta in the Romanov typikon of 1382, and this name should be considered a second monastic name for her. At the same time, one can see the mixing of her name and her secular and monastic status. She is first referred to as "the first Serbian empress Jelisaveta," and then as "Serbian empress, consort of Stefan, Serbian emperor, the nun Jevgenija." M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 14. See also below.

¹⁵ In addition to charters issued by King Vukašin and Despot Uglješa, and those issued by King Vukašin and Queen Jelena, all other diplomatic sources have been lost, apart from the charters of Prince Dmitar, the youngest son of Jelena and Vukašin, which were issued after he permanently relocated to King Sigismund's Hungary. A. Fostikov and A. Krstić, "Tri isprave i pečat Dmitra Kraljevića," [Three documents and a seal of Dmitar Kraljević] *Inicijal. Časopis za srednjovekovne studije* 11 (2023): 215–236.

II. Queen Jelena, the nun Jelisaveta

There is no reliable information about either Queen Jelena, the wife of King Vukašin, or the origins of the Mrnjavčevićes,¹⁶ and it is not known if this was her birth name or her baptismal name, but it was undoubtedly her secular name.¹⁷ It appears as Jelena or Elena on coins, but it was also written as Lena in a charter issued by King Vukašin in 1370.¹⁸ She had at least five children with King Vukašin: four sons—Marko, Andrijaš, Ivaniš, and Dmitar—and a daughter Olivera, who was probably born after Marko.¹⁹ Based on the widely accepted hypothesis

¹⁶ Considering that the rise of the Mrnjavčević house began in an earlier period, the brothers Jovan Uglješa and Vukašin were in significant positions in the mid-14th century, and their marriage policy clearly pointed to a degree of connection with other important houses. Uglješa married Jefimija, the daughter of Caesar Vojihna of Drama, who was a relative of Princess Milica, daughter of Vratko, a descendent of Vukan Nemanjić, and Jelena herself must have come from one of the important families from that period. According to folk tradition, she was the sister of the epic hero *vojvoda* Momčilo, but there is no confirmation of this in the sources. Considering there are no reliable sources, and there is no agreement in the historiography, some scholars believe that her origin may lie in the western Serbian lands, while others would prefer to search in the south first. If she had come from an important house, epic tradition would have mentioned that her son King Marko had inherited power from her side. V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića i teritorije pod njihovom vlašću: od 1371. do 1395. godine* (Beograd: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2013, PhD these) [Successors of the Mrnjavčević family and territories under their power 1371-1459], 49-50, 214, 273 n. 1463.

¹⁷ The name Helena/Jelena, based on Saint Helen, the wife of the saint and emperor Constantine, was often used by rulers and women from the mercantile class, so there are many Helens throughout history not just in medieval Serbian lands but also in neighboring territories and states. However, it would appear that the same name could be considered a titular name for women and could even be viewed as a sort of counterpart to the male titular name Stephanos. This is supported by the fact that the name was so prevalent that it is sometimes difficult to determine which Jelena is being referred to. An example also supporting this is the case of the Bosnian queen regnant Jelena Gruba, who also bore two names: her birth name and her baptismal name. For dual names, see also: I. Đurić, “Pomenik Svetogorskog Protata s kraja XIV veka,” *Zbornik radova vizantološkog instituta* 20 (1981): 139-169 [Memorial of Protat of the Saint Athos from the end of the 14th century].

¹⁸ S. Ćirković, “Povelja kralja Vukašina Dubrovniku kojom potvrđuje povelje ranijih srpskih vladara,” *Stari srpski arhiv SSA* 4 (2005): 162, 163, 169 n.1 [King Vukašin’s charter to Dubrovnik confirming the charters of earlier Serbian rulers]; Vujadin Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo*, 146-146, 266.

¹⁹ Based on what is already known, it is believed that they had another daughter whose name is unknown. According to folk tradition, her name was Milica. A. Fostikov, “O

that the oldest son, the future King Marko, was born between 1335 and 1340 when she was at least fifteen or sixteen (and most likely a bit older), she was probably born sometime between 1315 and 1325.²⁰

The first mention of her in currently known sources comes from the end of July 1361 and appears in a document from Ragusa, in which she is referred to as “the wife of Vukašin.” From this, one might think she was not someone of any particular or greater importance; however, there are two things that should be kept in mind. First, here she is mentioned within a group of directives issued on the same day regarding her deposit, which included twenty-five litras of silver withdrawn by her son Marko. Also, according to the directive preceding this one, it had been determined that, due to circumstances at the time, a missive should be sent to Vukašin and the empress, who was also not named. Since neither of them is mentioned by name, it would appear that the Ragusans recorded one Jelena as empress and another as the wife of Vukašin, probably to distinguish between these two Jelenas.²¹ Also, the fact that she still had her own deposit in Ragusa, certainly deposited before this date, that was separate from those of her

husband and son and that was not insignificant, suggests that she was already well-known to the Ragusans.

After this, the only other mention of Jelena is in a charter issued to Ragusa by King Vukašin in 1370. In it, Vukašin refers to her as Lena (an abbreviated form of Jelena), and explicitly mentions that he has issued the charter along “with the dearly beloved queen Kyra Lena and the dearly beloved sons of the kingdom, our Marko and Andrijaš.” The word for queen is written in vermilion, as is the word for the royal “our.”²²

There is another mention of her in the Ragusa archive, but it is dated much later in mid-1374, three years after her husband, King Vukašin died in the Battle of Marica. This time, she dealt with an inheritance—King Vukašin’s deposit in Ragusa—on her own behalf

Dmitru Kraljeviću,” [About Dmtitar Kralevic] *Istorijski časopis* XLIX (2002): 50 n. 21; V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjarčevića*, 82, 273.

²⁰ A. Fostikov, O Dmitru, 50; V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjarčevića*, 273

²¹ *Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium: Monumenta Ragusina. Libri reformationum: Tomus 3 (A. 1359-1364)* (Zagrabiae: Sumptibus Academiae scientiarum et artium, 1895), 100.

²² S. Ćirković, *Povelja kralja Vukašina*, 162.

and that of her children, not just as a widow but also as *mater familiaris*. Here, as is shown in documents kept in the Dubrovnik archives, she had her own *protovestiarios*, a man named Dabizivo, who represented both her and her children, who were the heirs, which confirms that, at least at this time, she had her own court and treasury. In this instance, she is recorded as the wife of King Vukašin, and his heirs are grouped as *heredum*.²³

This is the final known reference to Jelena in the surviving sources that was written during her lifetime. Her name is also recorded in two inscriptions: one from 1376-77 in the Church of Saint Demetrius in Sušica, and another from 1388-89 in the monastery of Saint Andrew on the Treska River. In the former, only Queen Jelena is mentioned, and a *ketor* composition depicts her standing next to Vukašin as they present a model of the church to their son Marko. Although her portrait has only survived in fragments, she can still be seen dressed in purple (a red dress). She has a halo, and parts of the crown indicate that it was tall and open.²⁴ In the other inscription, the one in the Church of Saint Andrew, which was an endowment of her other son Andrijaš, she is named as a queen and a nun (Queen Jelena, the nun Jelisaveta)²⁵ which emphasizes her specific position. This second inscription indicates that she seems to have a dual titular name, just as Princess Milica would

²³ S. Ćirković, Sima, "Poklad Kralja Vukašina," *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 14-1 (1979): 155 n. 9. [Deposit of King Vukašin]

²⁴ Aleksandra Šutinosa Belčurovska, *Materijalnata kultura*, 17, 36, 41, 134, 135, 137-138, 307.

²⁵ In much of the literature, including a new edition of King Vukašin's Dubrovnik charter, this inscription was incorrectly cited according to an older reading as "kraljica Jelena a Jelisaveta," which raises a number of questions. In the early 20th century, and as seen in a new reading of the inscription from 1975, attention was focused on the letter *a*, to which the letter *h* was added in the inscription, and according to the Greek tradition, the abbreviation *ab* indicated a nun. S. Ćirković, *Povelja kralja Vukašina*, 172, cf. D. Kostić, "Dvostruko monaško ime kraljice Jelene, udovice Vukašinove," *Bogoslovje* 1-2 (1937): 262-266 [Double monastic name of Queen Jelena, widow of Vukašin]; N. Nospal-Nikuljska, "Prilog za manastiro sv. Andreja na reka Treska na bregot na ezeroto Matka," [Contribution for the monastery of St. Andreje on the river Treska on the hill on Lake Matka] in *Spomenici za srednekovnata i ponovata istorija na Makedonija* 1, ed Vladimir Mošin (Skopje, 1975), 390-391. The inscription was best read by Prolović, see: Jadranka Prolović, *Die Kirche des Heiligen Andreas an der Treska. Geschichte, Architektur und Malerei einer palaiologzeitlichen Stiftung des serbischen Prinzen Andreas* (Vienne: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 32-50.

later on.²⁶ This dual titular name also appears in both surviving copies of the later Bigorski beadroll. In the first, she is referred to as “Queen Jelisaveta the Nun,” and in the second as “Queen Nun Jelisaveta.”²⁷

After the Battle of Marica in 1371, Jelena became a widow. Although the deaths of King Vukašin and his brother Despot Uglješa marked the beginning of a slow disintegration of the territory left to Vukašin’s heirs, Jelena’s status did not change significantly, or at least not at first. It is possible that she immediately took monastic vows, as other widows did, or certainly before 1388/89 when she is referred to as a nun in the inscription in the Church of St. Andrew. Nevertheless, this could possibly have happened later, considering that she could not have done so during the mourning period, and probably not even during the interregnum between the death of King Vukašin and Marko’s official ascension to the throne. If she had, the state would have been left without an official ruler.²⁸ She took Jelisaveta as her

²⁶ A. Fostikov, *Povelja monahinje kneginje Jevgenije*, 151-168.

²⁷ N. Celakoski, *Najstariot pomenik*, 226 i table 6 i 7; V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjančevića*, 265-266.

²⁸ Currently it is not possible to determine exactly when Jelena took her monastic vows. Although it must have occurred during the period between Marko’s coronation as king and the information from the inscription of Saint Andrew, information about Marko’s coronation is not reliable. His coronation is believed to have occurred somewhere between 1371/72 and 1376/77, based on his portraits at Saint Archangel Michael in Prilep and Saint Dimitrija in Sušica, although it is believed he was most likely crowned shortly after the Battle of Marica. Rade Mihaljičić, *Kraj Srpskog carstva*, 168, 171; Smilja Marjanovic-Dusanic, *Vladarske insignije i državna simbolika u Srbiji od XIII do XV veka* (Beograd: SANU, 1994), 64-65 [The Rulers’ insignia and the state symbolism of medieval Serbia]. The possibility that he was crowned king in 1371/72 seems too early. Empress Jelena was still alive at that time, judging by records from the 16th century that she died in November 1376. In a typicon from 1382, only the month of November was recorded but without a year. Rade Mihaljičić, *Kraj Srpskog carstva*, 177-179; M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 14. The period of mourning and reorganization and time for the preparations may have lasted for quite a while. Also supporting a somewhat later official coronation is the fact that Jelena appears as the head of the house in a 1374 legation. However, her portrait in the Church of Saint Dimitrija, painted in 1376/77, in which she is dressed in secular attire, does not necessarily indicate that she had not already taken the veil, considering that Princess Milica is also presented in secular garb in portraits even after she had taken monastic vows. Also, considering that her son Ivaniš is mentioned in the Bigorski commemorative book as still living, 1385 as the year of his death would be terminus post quem for when Jelena took her monastic vows. In the same Church of Saint Dimitrija, there is depiction of a meeting between Jelisaveta, the mother of John the

monastic name.²⁹ Despite there being multiple ways to interpret this, starting with the fact that, as a rule, she would no longer be eligible for marriage, it also prevented her from legally taking the throne.

When Vukašin was crowned king and co-ruler with Emperor Uroš in 1365, she also took the title of queen. The sources indicate that, rather than being merely a queen consort, she was most likely also a co-ruler alongside King Vukašin, at least within the bounds of the Mrnjavčević lands. There is considerable evidence here that supports her being of high status within the Mrnjavčević state. This includes her title written in red in the aforementioned Ragusa charter from 1370 (just as Empress Jelena's was in the Great Charter of Prilep), appearing in the *ketor* portrait with King Vukašin and King Marko with a high open crown (also like that of Empress Jelena), and being depicted as a queen on coins issued by her husband King Vukašin, also with a high open crown and wearing a sakkos, a maniakion, and a diadem, while holding a scepter with pearls in her left hand.³⁰

After her husband's death, she issued coins independently. It is also worth noting that her first coinage coincides with a type of coin issued by King Vukašin, but while her legend names her as Queen Jelena, only the king appears on the other. This type may not be connected to King Vukašin, but it does not rule out the possibility that it was the first coinage of the interregnum period. Furthermore, one of the coins attributed to her but from a later period, coincides with one from her other son Andrijaš, who is mentioned in the *ketor* inscription in the Church of Saint Andrew. An interesting feature of these coins is that, instead of the name Jelena, there is an abbreviation of the name Jevrosima, which is the name by which Jelena is remembered in folk tradition. Some have suggested that this is, in fact, a third name and a second monastic name. Additionally, it should also be noted that, so

Baptist, and the Virgin Mary, most likely because of Jelena herself. V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića*, 266-267, 478. This would have further emphasized the sanctity of the new dynasty, and this scene is further evidence that she had already become a nun or became one soon after.

²⁹ For now it remains unclear if she took this name because of Empress Jelena or if it was an allusion to Jovandan, 1371 when the Battle of Marica took place. V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića*, 478.

³⁰ See note 13 above and the following. For more on issuances of her currency and her portrait on King Vukašin's coins, see: Vujadin Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo*, 143-144, 146-147, 265-266.

far, the number of her dinars that have been found far exceeds those of her sons, the kings Marko and Andrijaš.³¹ If one accepts such context, she should be considered a full-fledged ruler who had royal rights, at least within some of the Mrnjavčević lands,³² and that, in accordance with Empress Jelena and her contemporary Princess Milica, she continued to rule within the secular domain as a nun and queen until her death. If she had been the primary representative of her house during the interregnum period, the appearance of Dabiziv, the *protovestiaris* in Ragusa, who then acted on behalf of the queen and the heir to King Vukašin, would attest to this.

Although the date of her death is unknown, she was most certainly still alive in 1394 when her younger sons Andrijaš and DMITAR withdrew the deposit of their father, King Vukašin, in Ragusa while on the way to Hungary after the rift in her family. Given that the last time she appears in a monument that can be dated is in the 1388/89 inscription in the church of Andrijaš's endowment in Treska, this year would be *terminus ante quem* for her death.³³

However, the name of Queen Jelena, whether secular or monastic, is not found in surviving chronicles (except for the Bigorski beadroll), does not appear outside the Mrnjavčević lands, and is not even recorded as a *ketor* of Hilandar. This, however, could be due to very practical reasons. In accordance with the politics of new lineages and

³¹ D. Kostić, Dvostruko monaško ime, 264-266; Vujadin Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo*, 143, 146-147, 159, 266, 268-269. For Jevrosima in folk songs, see: Katica Darmanović, *Tipologija i funkcija ženskih likova u epskim pesmama Vukove zbirke* (Novi Sad: Univerzitet u Novom Sadu, Filozofski fakultet, 2016, PhD these), 19-28 [Typology and Function of Female Characters in Epic Poetry Collection of Epic Poems Written by Vuk]

³² Even though it is believed that Vukašin's heirs ruled according to a system of shared power, and that Marko had his own province, and that Jelena remained at the court of her second son Andrijaš along with her younger sons Ivaniš and DMITAR, it seems that the younger brothers also had shared provinces, considering that a seal of the youngest DMITAR from a later period has been found. Although there is currently no information about the relationship between her and Marko, the fact that she is listed together with Vukašin, but without Marko, in the inscription in the Church of Saint Andrew, indicates that she was not just a queen mother or queen consort, but that she had her own status within the successors' state. For more on Marko's reign in more recent times with reference to contemporary historiography, see: B. Petrovski, "Kralstvo na Marko: domet i karakter," *Balcanoslavica* 47-2 (2018): 231-240 [The Kingdom of Marko: its scope and character]. For more on DMITAR's seal, see: A. Fostikov and A. Krstić, *Trisprave i pečat*, 215-236.

³³ V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića*, 267.

with the stance of the Church, which in principle was inclined toward the new rulers, the names from the Mrnjavčević house are found sporadically in a few beadrolls, and some of these mention Vukašin but not Marko. In one of the beadrolls, the name Vukašin was even subsequently crossed out. Similar occurrences have been found in Danilo's Typicon of 1416, in which a list of Hilandar *ketetors* was shortened, with Empress Jelena and Princess Milica among those that were removed, but the name of Queen Helene d'Anjou was retained. Given that, as has already been mentioned in the literature, the surviving sources are not entirely authoritative, the typicons must also be viewed as the subjective opinion of the editors.³⁴

It is also difficult to establish the full extent of Queen Jelena's reign due to the political situation, centrifugal forces in the rest of the Serbian empire, Ottoman encroachment, and the formation of multiple co-rulerships in the southern parts of the empire based on the Byzantine principle of co-rulers. Vukašin and Uglješa were prime examples of the latter,³⁵ as were Empress Jelena, Vukašin, and Emperor Uroš. This was clearly followed by Vukašin, Emperor Uroš, and the young King Marko, then Vukašin and Queen Jelena, and after that a sort of co-rulership between Queen Jelena and their successors, especially with Marko after Vukašin's death.

III. Princess Milica, the nun Jevgenija

Unlike Queen Jelena, much more detail is known of the life and reign of Princess Milica thanks to several surviving sources, among which are documents that she herself issued. She was also a focus of attention in a few narrative sources. Overall, there has been more interest in Princess Milica, primarily within literature and then followed by art history and historiography, than there has been in Queen Jelena, and it is possible

³⁴ N. Celakoski, *Najstariot pomenik*, 232 n. 61; M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 16-17 n.38; V. G. Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića*, 408. Unlike Danilo's name, the name of Milica as the nun Jefrosinija (Milica's second monastic name) was written in the Romanov typikon as an additional note after the princess's death in 1405. M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 15.

³⁵ Rade Mihaljević, *Kraj Srpskog carstva*, 109.

to have a very detailed view of her life and her political circumstances, which she navigated for at least a decade and a half.³⁶

The exact year in which Milica was born is unknown, but what we do know is that she had at least seven children with Lazar—two sons and six daughters (Stefan, Vuk, Mara, Olivera, Dragana, Jela, Teodora, and Olivera). She gave birth to the third daughter Jelena between 1366 and 1371, and to the older son Stefan in 1377, and her marriage to Lazar must have occurred in the 1350s, which taken together would suggest that she was born sometime in the 1330s.³⁷ As a descendant of a branch of Nemanjić dynasty that was descended from Vukan Nemanjić, this younger contemporary of the queen nun Jelena could claim the right to inherit the holy dynasty, especially after the Serbian empire collapsed and there were no more direct heirs. The deaths of King Vukašin and Despot Uglješa at Marica, and then the death of Emperor Uroš that same year, enabled the rise of the local *gospodars*. Unlike what occurred with the state of Jelena, Vukašin, and their heirs, the nobles in the north gathered around Prince Lazar and Queen Milica relatively quickly.³⁸ However, after Prince Lazar's demise at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, Milica found herself in a similar situation to that of Queen Jelena a decade earlier. Without a husband, but in her case with underage sons, territory that had just acquired a particular status, and a house that had just gathered the support of local nobles and *gospods* that

³⁶ Considering that Milica has been the subject of a number of works, particularly in recent times, and that her life has been considered within works about her husband, her son, Despot Stefan, and other descendants (including her daughters, who also had a place and political role in government), attention here is given only to works that give an overview of primary sources and older literature, along with a review of certain important issues. These are: S. Mišić, “Kneginja Milica i Lazarevo nasleđe,” in *Kneginja Milica-monahinja Jevgenija i njeno doba*, eds Siniša Mišić and Dejan Ječmenica (Trstenik : Narodni univerzitet Trstenik; Narodna biblioteka “Jefimija”; Filozofski fakultet Beograd, 2014), 7-15 [Princess Milica and the legacy of prince Lazar]; A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, *Jevgenija*, 171–181; M. Šuica, *Milica kneginja nemirnog doba* (Beograd: Evoluta, 2020) [Milica, princess of troubled age]; A. Fostikov, *Povelja monahinje kneginje*, 151-168.

³⁷ Miodrag Purković, *Kćeri kneza Lazara* (Beograd: Pešić i sinovi, 1996), 9, 73 [Daughters of Prince Lazar]; S. Mišić, *Kneginja Milica*, 7-8.

³⁸ For more on the events accompanying the rise of the provincial *gospodars* and their provinces, including the rise of the house of Lazarević, see: Rade Mihaljčić, *Kraj Srpskog carstva*; Marko Šuica, *Nemirno doba srpskog srednjeg veka* (Beograd: Službeni list, 2000) [The restless era of the Serbian Middle Ages].

also under attack by the Ottomans and the Branković house, with whom she struggled for control, she found herself in charge and began ruling independently.³⁹

However, despite becoming one of the significant women from the medieval Serbian state, the first time she is mentioned in the sources is only later and as the wife of Prince Lazar, and it appears within a group of sources such as genealogies that were meant to establish the Lazarević house as the legitimate heir to the Nemanjić house and to put forward its son as the true heir. Because of this, later on, even some events of exceptional importance, such as convening the *sabor* (assembly) after the Battle of Kosovo in 1390/91, which could not have been organized de facto by a single one of her underage sons, were attributed to her older son, the future Despot Stefan, who at the time was all of twelve years old.⁴⁰

For four years, she independently conducted foreign and domestic policy until 1393 when Stefan came of age, after which she took the veil under the name Jevgenija, leaving Stefan able to take the reins, at least in principle. During the four years she officially served as regent, she managed not only to defend her country from internal threats but also to form a number of alliances. However, even after taking the veil, she did not withdraw from public life. She instead retained some of her power and engaged in diplomacy, serving as the primary representative of her house in negotiations with the sultan Bayezid. During the entire time she was a nun and until her death in November 1405, she also independently led her own regions, conducted foreign policy, collected duties, held her own court, had her own vassals and administration, and maintained her position as de facto co-ruler even after Stefan's ascension to the throne. Evidence for this lies in her last known acts issued in September 1405, two months before she died. Before her death, she took Jefrosina as another monastic name.⁴¹ Due to her

³⁹ S. Mišić, *Kneginja Milica*, 7-10.

⁴⁰ A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, *Jevgenija*, 174.

⁴¹ M. Al Purković, "Kad se pokaluderila kneginja Milica," *Južni pregled* 13(1939): 332-336 [When Princess Milica became a nun]; M. Blagojević, *Savladarstvo*, 185-197; A. Fostikov, "Tri dokumenta o razrešenju računa Vukše Mišetića : 1405, septembar 12.; 1405, oktobar 2;" [Three documents on the settlement of Vukša Mišetić's accounts: 1405, September 12; 1405, October 2] *Stari srpski arhiv* 11 (2012): 123-133; S. Mišić, *Kneginja Milica*, 7-15; A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, *Jevgenija*, 171-181; M. Šuica, *Milica*, *passim*.

actions and role as co-ruler, she is referred to in the local historiography as a “secular monastic/nun,” which is what best describes her role and position within everyday politics in the Lazarević state.⁴²

As it was for Empress Jelena, Milica’s dual status was the reason that the Ragusans alternately addressed her in their letters by her secular name and title or by her monastic name and title, and even by her secular title with her monastic name added: *Gospoda* Princess Kyr Jevgenia. However, unlike Empress Jelena and Queen Jelena, one of her documents, which she issued in August 1398 for Velika Lavra, one of the monasteries on Mount Athos, has survived. It contains her dual title, her personal seal, her superscription, and her signature. As is clearly shown, her official superscription was *Gospoda* Princess Kyra Jevgenija the Nun, and she signed her name as Jevgenia Nun–Princess. The legend on her seal was the same.⁴³ The fact that she retained her position within the co-rulership as a nun with a dual titular name, as did her predecessor Queen Jelena and, it would appear, Empress Jelena, clearly demonstrates that she remained a nun even as a sovereign within a co-rulership. This was not unheard of among her contemporaries, who, judging by the sources, do not appear to have questioned her role.

Unlike Queen Jelena, a member of the Mrnjavčević house whom folk tradition accuses of treachery and blames for the collapse of the empire, Princess Milica, a member of a branch of the Nemanjić line that continued through the Lazarević line, appears in narrative sources produced by her contemporaries. Due to the political need for a new dynasty to be enthroned through Despot Stefan, there is no hagiography for Milica, or at least not one that has been found. However, the description of her in the Life of Despot Stefan glorifies this princess/nun’s strength and power, along with her capacity to rule, as illustrated by the masculine epithet given to her, which essentially equates her rights and abilities with those of men.⁴⁴ On the throne,

⁴² M. Šuica, *Milica*, 117.

⁴³ A. Fostikov, Povelja monahinje kneginje Jevgenije, 151-168.

⁴⁴ Milica is said to be a “masculine woman” who “cast off feminine importance and took on male zealousness.” S. Tomin, “Mužastvena žena`. O jednom toposu srpske književnosti srednjeg veka,” in *Srpski jezik, književnost, umetnost: zbornik radova sa V međunarodnog naučnog skupa održanog na Filološko-umetničkom fakultetu u Kragujevcu, (29-30. X 2010). Knj. 2, Žene: rod, identitet, književnost*, ed. Dragan Bošković (Kragujevac: Filološko-umetnički fakultet: Skupština grada, 2011), 87–96. [‘Masculine Women’ About a one topos of Serbian literature of the Middle Ages]

acting independently as regent and later as a co-ruler with broad powers, Milica became yet another woman in a long line of those who reigned supreme over the state and her own provinces, despite having taken monastic vows.

IV. A Comparative View

Based on all of the above, just like Empress Jelena, both Queen Jelena and Princess Milica were compelled by their circumstances to rely on themselves through their own authority to not only maintain their house's superior position, but also to rule just as their husbands had before them, to preserve their dynasty and their territories, as was the case with Milica and the sovereignty of the state.

A female predecessor who ruled independently, at least over her own territory, is Queen Helene d'Anjou, who ruled independently for over 30 years over a large province at the end of the 13th century. Just as Princess Milica did later, she held her own court and had her own state apparatus, independently convened the *sabor* in her province, issued documents, disposed of her own revenues gained from duties, had broad independence in foreign policy, had her own vassals and army, and assisted the Catholic Church. Furthermore, she is the only woman from the 13th century to have a hagiography in Danilo's Miscellany, which contains the histories of Serbian kings and archbishops, and who earned the right to have her name read in the annual memorial at Hilandar, along with the rulers from the Nemanjić dynasty.⁴⁵ So too did Empress Jelena, who had a seat on the state council during Emperor Dušan's lifetime. She also accompanied her husband during military conflicts, and later ruled over a large swathe of territory, the Serres province, where she had royal rights, issued currency, issued acts, had her own court, *vlastela*, and army, and also acquired the right to be a *ketetor* of Hilandar. As can be seen from the sources referenced here, she accomplished all of this while still a nun.⁴⁶

Milica also acquired the right to be included among the *ketetors* of Hilandar and commemorated. Just as Queen Helene d'Anjou and

⁴⁵ Helene d'Anjou's territory stretched from Dubrovnik to Ulcinj, and she her possessions also included the province of Plava and the Ibar River valley. M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 19-21.

⁴⁶ M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 21-22.

Empress Jelena, Milica also independently ruled the entire state on behalf of her sons as a full ruler after the death of Prince Lazar. And just like Empress Milica, even after she took monastic vows, she continued to not only influence the course of events for the state, but also independently ruled over a swathe of territory that remained in her possession until her death. In her case, there is direct confirmation that during at least one part of her reign, in addition to being a nun, she also officially used a dual title.⁴⁷ Queen Jelena was the only one of these female rulers who was not entered into the list of *ketitors* of Hilandar, primarily because she did not descend from the Nemanjićs, but also because she was a representative of the Mrnjavčević house, which was pushed out of political and ecclesiastical affairs in medieval Serbia due to political circumstances. However, in her case, there are clear indications that she was a sovereign ruler, and that she retained her royal rights, at least over some territory, and that she held her own court, had her own administration, and issued her own currency. As in the case of Milica, there is solid evidence that she had a dual titular name.

In terms of power and authority, these women did indeed steer their states and their regions as sovereign rulers and as if they had royal rights, despite having taken monastic vows.⁴⁸ These examples clearly show that at one time they were not only recognized as sovereigns, but in accordance with their status, they held dual titular names from their secular and monastic statuses, which in the case of Princess Milica is clearly demonstrated by her surviving stamp and official signature. Without raising the questions at this point that have yet to be investigated—how many women governed their own provinces while also nuns, and how many of them had a position within medieval Serbian politics—it must be pointed out that there were a number of women from the late 13th century, and especially the late 14th century, who found a place for themselves alongside men. In addition to the capable and influential women mentioned here, in medieval Serbia

⁴⁷ M. Blagojević, *Srpske vladarke*, 23-24.

⁴⁸ Within the context of all this, it should also be noted that the Middle Ages, and especially the Late Middle Ages, as pointed out within research of women in Europe, can be considered a period of queens and abbesses. During this time, there were increasingly more women of high status who were engaged in politics as monastics. A. Fostikov and V. Petrović, *Jevgenija*, 177 n. 19.

there were, among others, Teodora–Jevdokija, the wife of Dejan Dragaš; Mara Branković, daughter of Princess Milica; Jelena Balšić; Eirene Kantakouzene; Mara Branković, daughter of Đurađ Branković; and Jelena Nelipčić, along with Jelena Gruba in medieval Bosnia. However, as new research has shown, not even their names are included among the women who had either power or influence over the course of events.⁴⁹

V. Conclusion

As can be seen from what has been presented here, when considering the position of women who ruled over either a province or an entire state, the specific position of women rulers who were also nuns—albeit with only two confirmed examples (and if the indications for Empress Jelena are included, one can easily say three)—represent only a fragment of the history of women in medieval Serbia. Therefore, attention here is drawn to the fact that, although the right of primogeniture based on the male line held sway in Serbia, it was not always followed consistently.⁵⁰ Women could find themselves not only

⁴⁹ The topic of this paper is not all women with power and authority to rule. However the following works are relevant to this: M. Blagojević, *Savladarstvo*, 199-201; M. Blagojević, “Zakon gospodina Konstantina i carice Jevdokije,” *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog instituta* 44 (2007): 447-458 [Law of Gospodin Constantine and Empress Evdokia]; S. Tomin, “Bibliografija radova o Jeleni Balšić (između 1366. i 1371–1443),” *Knjiženstvo, časopis za studije književnosti, roda i kulture* 1 (2011) [Bibliography of the Works on Jelena Balšić (between 1366 and 1371–1443)], http://www.knjiženstvo.rs/sr/casopisi/2011/bibliografije/bibliografija-radova-o-jeleni-balsic-izmedju-1366-i-1371-1443#_edn1 (accessed October 21, 2024); M. Ivanović, “Pisma Dubrovnica Mari i Đurđu Brankoviću,” *Stari spski arhiv* 11 (2012): 115–121 [Letters from Dubrovnik to Mara and Đurađ Branković]; M. St. Popović, “Srpska princeza Mara Branković između Svete zemlje, Vaseljenske patrijaršije i Dubrovnika,” *Smederovski zbornik* 5 (2016): 55-73; [Serbian Princess Mara Branković between the Holy Land, the Universal Patriarchy and Dubrovnik]; J. Mrgić and A. Fostikov, *Ženski glasovi*, 390-392; I. D. Veselinović, “Uloga despine Irine Kantakuzin u političkom životu Srpske despotovine,” *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Prištini* 52-2 (2022): 177-190 [The Role of the Despotess Irene Kantakouzene in the Political Life of the Serbian Despotate].

⁵⁰ The principle of equality and disregard of primogeniture following the male line is clearly seen in the example of Despotess Eirene (Jerina) Kantakouzene and Despot Đurađ. Despite having male offspring and there being no shortage of heirs, he chose his wife, who had ruled alongside him, as his successor. I. D. Veselinović, *Uloga despine*, 177-190.

on the throne or at the head of a house if there were no male heirs, but they could also end up ruling a portion of territory or having full royal rights. Essentially, they were not limited by either secular or monastic status. In fact, as a nun, it seemed to be much easier for them to sit on the throne, although they could not be crowned or rule the entire Serbian state de jure. These women, however, were not hindered by this, and ruled as full de facto rulers. Modern historiography has only just begun to wade into the history of women and power, and as recent works looking at powerful women have shown, this topic has yet to be fully and comprehensively explored.

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