Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

The Life of Katarina Vukčić Kosača, the Bosnian Queen (1424-1478)

Bazilije Pandžić

In the history of medieval Bosnia, only a few women have left such a prominent mark as Katarina Vukčić Kosača, who is one of the most compelling among them. Her life story illuminates the history of the Bosnian Kingdom in its last few decades to such a remarkable extent that it is no wonder that all those describing the 15th-century Bosnia devote to her all the attention she deserves.

Childhood and Adolescence

Katarina Vukčić Kosača was a daughter of a distinguished Bosnian aristocrat, Duke Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, and her mother Jelena, daughter of Balša III (1403-1421), came from a long line of royalty – the House of Balšić. In 1421, when Balša III died, he left his daughters behind, leaving them to the care of his mother Jelena Balšić, daughter of the Serbian Duke Lazar, who, during that time, was married to the Bosnian nobleman Sandalj Hranić. Sandalj and his wife married one of Balša's daughters, Jelena, to Sandalj's nephew Stjepan: his father was Vukac, named Vukčić afterwards. Around 1424, Jelena gave birth to a girl named Katarina Vukčić Kosača, the late Bosnian Queen.

Katarina grew up, and was raised in her parents' home. Her father, Stjepan, was a respected associate of his uncle Sandalj Hranić. However, after Sandalj's death in 1435, Stjepan took charge of his possessions. Katarina, without any doubt, heeded her father's undertakings, who discerning, enterprising, and inconsiderate as he was, was spreading his possessions and reputation within the Bosnian Kingdom. Once she turned twenty-one, and reached the marriage age, she became the focal point of Bosnian politics, which happened in 1443, when Stjepan Tomaš (1443-1461) succeeded King Tvrko II (1421-1443).

When Tomaš ascended the throne, there existed two political parties in Bosnia: the more powerful one held the belief that battle with the Turks should be continued in any case. The other party, however, was in favor of reaching an agreement with the Turks. The head of that party was Radivoj, the illegitimate son of the king Ostoja (1398-1404). The party that supported the battle against the Turks appointed Stjepan Tomaš, who zealously accepted their political agenda, for their leader. Since he was a Patarine by that time, he embraced the Catholic religion, and in doing so, was able to

cooperate more easily with other Catholic rulers in their mutual battle against the Turks. After Stjepan Tomaš ascended to the throne, there were two significant matters that overshadowed his royal service: first and foremost, he was an illegitimate child; secondly, his marriage was not in compliance with Catholic rituals, namely, he lived with some woman of low lineage, named Vojača, who he promised to marry. To reslove those two problems, he asked Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) for help, and so, the help came on 29 May 1445, when the Pope proclaimed him the legal King of Bosnia, and helped him break his promise of marrying Vojača.

Once proclaimed the legal King, Stjepan Tomaš undertook steps to reach an agreement with the party favoring negotiations with the Turks – besides, the party was run by his brother Radivoj. The party was getting the strongest support from Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, whose daughter Katarina was now ripe for marriage. To establish a friendship with Stjepan, Stjepan Tomaš, who was undoubtedly induced by his advisers, decided to propose to Katarina. The wedding took place in May 1446, most probably on the holy day of Assumption, which was on the 26th of May that year.

The Bosnian Queen

By marrying Sjepan Tomaš, Katarina became the Bosnian Queen. Even though political considerations played an important role when she was getting married, Katarina was faithful to her husband throughout her entire life. Their marriage embroidery was based upon the Christian foundations, which they adopted more and more over time.

A) At the Bosnian Royal Court

Before the marriage, Katarina lived in a Patarine dominated environment, since her father was a distinguished Patarine, however, she was certainly influenced by her grandmother Jelena, who was Orthodox. She must have also known some Catholics, for many of them lived on her father’s land.

After she resolved to marry the Bosnian King Tomaš, who had already embraced Catholicism, Katarina herself decided to follow his religion. The Bosnian Franciscans were in charge of her religious conduct. Shortly after her marriage on 18 June 1446, Pope Eugene IV granted her permission to select two chaplains among the Bosnian Franciscans. After the wedding, Katarina always declared herself a Catholic: she and her husband ordered several churches to be built, and obtained spiritual pardons from the popes; it was Katarina who ordered the construction of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Vrila, and the Church of St. Katarina in Jajce.

The marriage between Katarina and Stjepan Tomaš greatly contributed to peace within the Bosnian Kingdom, primarily because Stjepan Vukčić Kosača was considerate of his son-in-law. Nonethless, such were the circumstances that this was unhelpful, even though Stjepan Tomaš demonstrated enough skill, and invested much effort to fortify and protect his kingdom. Constant intrusions of the Turkish army strained everyone’s nerves, so it was not easy to look at all of the events reasonably, resolve imposed questions in a cold-blooded way, and make intelligent plans for the future. While gathering his strength to resist the superior Turkish army that was

frequentely knocking at the doors of his kingdom, Stjepan Tomaš died in July 1461. Katarina was now a widow, left with two of her feeble children: Sigismund and Katarina.

The new king, Stjepan Tomašević (1461-1463), who succeeded Tomaš's throne, proclaimed Katarina the Queen Mother, and so she was able to stay at the Bosnian Court. Katarina's father greatly valued that act, and he therefore did not find it difficult to proclaim Tomašević a King, when asked to do so by the King's delegates.

B) Escape from Homeland

In the meantime, the Turks were rushing towards Bosnia: in the spring of 1463, the sultan Mehmed II (1451-1481) rushed with his powerful army, and conquered Bosnia with no difficulty. He executed the Bosnian King Stjepan Tomašević, but the two feeble children of Stjepan Tomaš – Sigismund and Katarina, he took into slavery. It seems that at that time, Katarina was visiting her brother Vladislav, and that is how she escaped a similar fate. She saved herself by fleeing to Dubrovnik.

In July 1463, Katarina was situated in the Republic of Dubrovnik: she lived on the island of Lopud. On July 23, the Dubrovnik Senate granted her a permission to come to Dubrovnik, in case she wanted that, and indeed she went there to solve the question regarding the relations between the Bosnian Kingdom and the Republic of Dubrovnik, under new circumstances. On that occasion, she carried the sword of Stjepan Tomaš, depositing it in Dubrovnik, so that it be given to her son Sigismund, if he managed to free himself from Turkish slavery.

Well-known documents from Dubrovnik do not contain any information of when exactly Katarina left the Republic, but she certainly did not stay there long enough. One of the reasons for leaving the Republic so quickly could have been the fact that the state looked upon her stay reluctantly: namely, they feared that her stay might provoke the Turks. Most probably, what made her depart from Dubrovnik so quickly was her strong will to personally contribute to the liberation of her kingdom. Before the fall of Bosnia, Pope Pius II (1458-1464) was trying to persuade all of the Christian rulers to mutually expel the Turks from Europe. The fall of Bosnia, and the assassination of its king was a new call for an uproar. On September 21, 1463, Pius II announced to the Christian world, through the letter Ezechielis prophetae, that he was going to lead a crusade against the Turks, and had invited the crusaders to meet in Ancona, in June 1464. As promised, Pius II came to Ancona on August 12, 1464. His sudden death there, three days later, prevented him from seeing the failure of his generous plan.

The Pope's attempts to bring Bosnia back to its feet were the only hopes for Katarina that her kingdom could become liberated. Then, it is no wonder that she decided to leave to Rome, and there, just by her presence, plead for the liberation of her state.

C) The Stay in Rome

It is not known exactly when Queen Katarina came to Rome: some people think she arrived during the lifetime of Pius II. In any case, it seems that she never came into contact with him, since the only popes she mentions in her testament are Paul II and

Sixtus IV.

1. In Rome, Katarina was receiving generous help from the Pope, so she could live a life suitable to her royal dignity. That help was due to the crusades waged against the Turks: her monthly support was a hundred golden coins, and in addition to that, she would receive twenty golden coins a month to pay for her accommodation. Her first apartment in Rome was within the house of the Roman citizen Jacob Mentebona, to whom she would give those twenty golden coins for monthly rent. However, on 23 March 1468, the Pope's office for the crusades made the decision to pay the rent for her. The rent payment was for the period beginning on September 29, 1467, and she stayed in that house until September 1, 1469.

After leaving Jacob Mentebona's house, Katarina moved to another house – which perhaps belonged to the Croatian Fraternity of St. Jerome – where she lived for the rest of her life. The house was situated in the area of town, called Pigna (Latin Pinea), in the vicinity of the Church of St. Marco. A few days before she died, Katarina wrote a testament in this new house. On her way to Rome, Queen Katarina was accompanied by a few of her male and female courtiers, and she established a royal court there. The head of the Court was Radič Klešić Ivanov, while Jure Žubranić Nikolin, and Abraham Radič were the male courtiers. Her female courtiers were Paula Mirković, Jelena Semković, and Mara Mišljenović.

2. Though she was in a foreign land, far away from her kingdom, Katarina never forgot her royal position. She endured every misfortune with dignity, always presenting herself as a legal representative of her lost kingdom. The Italian public respected her and her unenviable destiny that could not overshadow her royal dignity. Several records from that period testify to Katarina's royal conduct. In 1471, in the Church of St. Peter, Zoe – the sister of the Serbian despot's wife Jelena – married, per procuram, the great Russian Duke Ivan III Vasiljević. Every source mentioning that wedding points out that Queen Katarina attended the religious wedding ritual of the couple. In 1472, in the town of L'Aquila, there was a solemn transfer of the bones of St. Bernardino of Siena to the new church erected in his honor. Even King Stjepan Tomaš gave a contribution for the building of the church. Katarina wanted to attend the transfer ceremony, and thus, dressed in black, she set out to L'Aquila, followed by five women, and two male courtiers. Writers documented Queen Katarina's visit and that of her escort. Interestingly, they only briefly described Katarina, but what caught their attention was the conduct of the courtiers, who all had shoulder-length blond hair.

Pope Sixtus IV proclaimed the year 1475 a jubilee year. Among the numerous pilgrims, a few of them were members of the royalty. Among them was Queen Katarina, who, on 25 March 1475, solemnly performed certain duites for the jubilee.

3. However, it was completely natural that while in Rome, Katarina would mostly think of her children, Sigismund and Katarina, who were taken into slavery by the Turks. Since the Turks would sometimes return children for a large sum of money, Katarina nurtured that exact thought for quite sometime, thinking that she could liberate her children in that way. In regard to this, in the year 1470, she sent two of her heralds – Nikola Žubranić, and Abraham Radić – to the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Sforza, to ask for his help. It is quite known that on that occasion she sent a letter to the duke, which

among other things, says:

> Facit mea adversu fortuna, quae viro rege ac liberis et regno opibusque spoliavit, ut non solum ad ponitificem maximum, patrem clementissimum, sed etiam alios principes christianos me confugere oporteat pro implorando subsidio.

The Duke Sforza promised help to Katarina's heralds, only if it was possible to accomplish their stated goals. In 1474, after almost four years, the Queen's new delegation traveled to Milan; at the head of the delegation was an abbot named Piero di Forte, followed by Abraham Radić, the Queen's cousin. They told the Duke of Milan that the Queen heard her son was going to be liberated by the Sultan, and so she decided to go to the border of the Ottoman Empire to retrieve him. Her heralds requested help to pay for the Queen's journey, or her debts in Rome. What exactly the Duke of Milan said to the heralds, nobody knows, but what is certain is that Katarina never saw her children again.

4. It was in Rome that the Christian convictions of Queen Katarina finally ripened. Even though she embraced Catholicism long before, and strived to live by its principles, her stay in the center of the Christian sphere of influence affected both her and her religious views. Her troubled destiny forced her to think of the meaning of life, deepening the resoluteness of her Christian faith, and forcing her to apply the rules of genuine Christian living to her life. In Rome, she established contact with the Franciscan monastery Aracoeli. She already knew Franciscans while she was in Bosnia, who instructed her in the real Christian truths. Then, it is no wonder that she searched for the Franciscans even in Rome, attended their Church, and consulted with them for her religious needs. It is precisely because of those close ties between the Queen and the Franciscans that we can assume the following: out of the seven witnesses present at the making of her testament, six of them were Franciscans of that monastery. Aracoeli monastery was a lively center of the Franciscan life in Rome. Even during that period, the Fraternity of the Third Order of St. Francis was developing within the monastery. Queen Katarina joined the Fraternity, and there was a high probability that she became a member of the Third Order before leaving Bosnia.

The first author mentioning that Queen Katarina was a member of that order was Friar Marian from Florence (d. 1523), who wrote the work Fasciculus chronicorum Ordinis Fratrum Minorum. It was from this work that all of the later Franciscan writers, such as Marco from Lisbon, Frances Gonzaga, and Pedro de Salazar, conveyed information on Queen Katarina, placing her among the saintly persons. The information on Katarina presented in De Salazar's work eventually became transformed into a liturgy book called Martyrologium Franciscanum, where she is depicted as a blessed person.

The aforementioned work by Friar Marian no longer exists, however, the book's brief abstract, which was written by the author, was kept. The abstract was recently published in the Franciscan journal Archivum Franciscanum Historicum. This is how

Friar Marian summarized his work on Katarina:

> Anno Domini 1478, die 25 Octobris, Rome, illustrissima Domina Catherina Bosne regina ex hac luce subtracta in Araceliu seppellitur Haec siquidem devotissima Regina, pluribus annis sub 3 Regula beati Francisci vixit habitumque publice portavit.

5. Inside the church of the Aracoeli monastery, the Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which among other things, was in charge of St. Albert's hospital in Rome, was gathering. Katarina zealously worked with this society, providing them help and support. For a long time after her death, members of the Society, once a year, would do a mass for the peace of her soul.

6. In Rome, Katarina waited longer than twelve years for circumstances to start working in her favor. The crusades, which were supposed to liberate her kingdom were not successful, even though Paul II (1464-1471) and Sixtus IV (1471-1484) worked much to achieve that. Even her personal aspirations to liberate her children from the Turks' shackles did not bear fruit. Moreover, she found out that both of her children were being raised according to the dictates of Islam. And so the days were passing one by one, with her life moving towards its end. Once she became severely ill on September 20, 1478, she – as the only legal representative of the Bosnian Kingdom – decided to write all of her wishes and rules for her kingdom, and the rest of her property in a testament. That day, Katarina invited the public notary Ante Jurina, then serving in the Roman Church of St. Peter, to formulate her testament according to the legal regulations; he was the minister of the Split diocese.

Seven witnesses attended the composition of her testament. One of them was Jure Marinov (de Marinellis), the archdeacon for the island of Rab, then in the service of Cardinal Marko Barbo. The remaining witnesses were Franciscans from Aracoeli monastery. In her testament, Katarina first expressed a wish that in case of her death, she should be buried in the Aracoeli church. She left two hundred golden coins for posthumous rituals, and her funeral. Immediately after that, she provided regulations on inheritance in the Bosnian Kingdom. Above all, she appointed Pope Sixtus IV and his successors as heirs to the Bosnian Kingdom, and asked them to hand it over to her son Sigismund, in the case he would re-convert to Christianity. If Sigismund decided not to become a Christian again, the Kingdom would be handed over to her daughter Katarina, in the case she converts back to Christianity. If, however, both of them were to remain Muslims, the Holy See would become the sole heir to the Bosnian Kingdom, and could, therefore, decide its fate according to its own discernment.

The rest of her property, both movable and immovable – except for the things expressly ordered otherwise – were to be distributed equally to her female courtiers: Paula Mirković, Jelena Semković, and Mara Mišljenović. Along with the two hundred golden coins for her funeral, Katarina decided to give the Franciscan church Aracoeli her royal cloak in gilded fabric, and the silk altar that she used in her own chapel. To the Church of St. Jerome, she left, pro natione Sclavonorum, the rest of her things from the chapel: missal, chalice with paten and corporal, chasuble, and the remaining

mass attire together with the silk altar. She ordered that all of her debts be paid, for she owed twenty-two golden coins to Paula Mirković, thirty-eight to Radič Klešić, and eighteen to Luka Vučiković.

In addition to that, she ordered that some gifts be distributed in her name. Thus, she gave fifty golden coins and two suits to Paula Mirković; twenty-five golden coins and one suit to Jelena Semković; thirty golden coins and one suit to Mara Mišljenović; fifty golden coins, a sword ornamented in silver, and a Turkish red silk suit interwoven in gold to Radič Klešić; and fifty golden coins to Jure Žubranić, and Abraham Radić. To her son Sigismund, she left the sword of his father, in the case Sigismund were to convert back to Christianity. If not, the sword was to be given to Balša, the son of her brother Vladislav. She also left a knife, two plates, and two silver jugs with lids to her children. Finally, all the relics she possessed were left to the Church of St. Katarina in Jajce.

As executors of her testament, she appointed Paula Mirković, Radič Klešić, and the Dubrovnik canon Mate de Raguis, then working in the service of Cardinal Julijan Rovera. Once the testament was completed, the Queen asked Bishop Bartolomej Marasco to lead the executors of her testament to Rodrigo Borgia, the vice-chancellor of the Roman Church, and ask him to hand the testament, together with King Tomaš's sword, to the Pope and the Assembly of Cardinals, so they can be preserved forever.

A few days later, Cardinal Borgia took some of Katarina's courtiers – perhaps the executors of the testament – to the Pope, and they handed him the legally written testament, the sword, and spurs. On that occasion, the Pope spoke of the Queen with the utmost respect, and he received everything they brought to him after Katarina's death. The Pope ordered his vice-chancellor to place the testament in his office archive, which he transcribed into the book of the Pope's treasury, called Camerario Cenci. Together with his associates, the Pope signed that transcribed copy, which is preserved to this day.

III – Death and Burial

Five days after the making of the testament, on September 25, Queen Katarina died. As ordered in her testament, she was buried in the Franciscan church Aracoeli. Her grave was placed near the main altar of the church. The tombstone was adorned with a relief statue of the Queen, with a crown on her head, in life size (1, 78 m). On each side of her head, a coat of arms was engraved, one being the royal Bosnian, the other that of the Kosača family. Beneath the tombstone, an inscription in bosančica was placed. Katarina's grave remained in that same place near the altar for over a hundred years. However, in 1590, the Franciscans decided to make some repairs on the altar: they moved the grave forward, so as to make the altar's choir higher. In order to perform that, they had to move Queen Katarina's grave to another place. Therefore, they removed the tombstone, and placed it on the highest column. What exactly happened to her bones, remains a mystery. Perhaps they were also moved, then placed inside that same column. Due to this transfer, the plaque with inscription in bosančica also disappeared. As a replacement, a plaque with a Latin inscription was added to her grave.

Nonetheless, we still have a genuine transcription of the initial inscription. It was transcribed by the Roman calligrapher Giambattista Palatino in 1545, and published in 1547, in his work on various types of alphabets. First of all, Palatino presented the inscription in bosančica, then its Latin transcription, followed by its translation into Latin. Today's Latin transcription under Queen Katarina's tombstone is the translation of the original inscription. Nonetheless, a translator made an enormous mistake, for the section "Katarina, the Bosnian Queen, descending from Stipan, the Duke of St. Saba" is expressed in the Latin words "Catharinae Reginae Bosnesi Stephani Ducis Sancti Sabae sorori" where a translator added the word "sorori." In doing so, he proclaimed Katarina the sister of Stjepan Vukčić Kosača – but she was his daughter.

Even though Queen Katarina's life ended in a foreign land, she did not sink into oblivion. The fact that her grave was placed near the main altar in one of the most famous churches in Rome – the official church of the Roman township – clearly indicated that the person buried inside once had an exceptional reputation, which called for permanent respect. To each of the visitors of their church, the Franciscans preached about the tumultuous fate of the queen who came to be remembered as a good and saintly woman, and became an ideal role model for the Christian way of life. For the past five centuries, her compatriots have been coming to the church Aracoeli, to see the ground containing the remains of Queen Katarina. They express their profound devotion to her meticulous life abounding in the conscience of Christian responsibility and royal grandeur.

© 2011 Bazilije Pandžić

*Translated by **Maja Pašović***

© 2011 Maja Pašović

The article was initially published in the book Historical-theological Symposium Marking the 500th Anniversary of Queen Katarina's Death; publisher The Franciscan theology in Sarajevo, and Kršćanska sadašnjost in Zagreb; Sarajevo, 1979

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.