

## DEATH OF ST. HELEN OF ANJOU AND THE SABOR

### INTRODUCTION: WHO WAS QUEEN HELEN?

Queen Helen (*Jelena*) of Serbia (?–1314) is an important and somewhat enigmatic historical figure. She was the wife of King Stefan Uroš I and the mother of two subsequent kings, Stefan Dragutin and Stefan Milutin, during whose reigns she was a relevant political factor<sup>1</sup>. She was the first among wives of rulers from the Nemanjić dynasty to have accumulated significant personal political power that she kept after her husband's death, in her status as queen dowager<sup>2</sup>, including a significant territory (the provinces of Zeta and Travunija/Trebinje, as

<sup>1</sup> Dragutin was king until 1282, upon which he made a treaty with his brother in Deževa, giving the throne to him, but stipulating that one of Dragutin's sons would get the crown after Milutin's death. Officially, that happened because Dragutin fell of his horse and broke his leg, but modern scholarship believes the true reason was political. However, the treaty was not followed subsequently, resulting in a civil war. Eventually, Milutin's son Stefan Dečanski took the throne. See: *Станковић В.* Краљ Милутин (1282–1321). Београд, 2012. С. 50–69; *Живковић В.* Српски краљеви Драгутин и Милутин: Проблем наслеђа српског престола крајем 13. и почетком 14. века. Ниш, 2021. 193 с.

<sup>2</sup> Ана, the wife of Grand Župan Stefan Nemanja, took monastic vows along with her husband when he abdicated. (*Перућ Ђ.* Мајка Св. Саве, госпођа Ана(стасија), према историји и предању // Теолошки погледи XIX. 1986. Т. 3–4. С. 213–217). His son, King Stefan the First-Crowned, married most likely three times. His last wife, Ana Dandolo, granddaughter of the infamous Doge Enrico Dandolo, outlived him by almost four decades, but there are no records of her political activity after her husband's death (*Коматина И.* Ана Дандоло–прва српска краљица? // Зборник Матице српске за историју. 2014. Т. 89. С. 7–22). Stefan's elder sons, Radoslav and Vladislav, reigned less than a decade each before being forced to leave the throne to their younger brother, and their spouses logically didn't have much influence afterwards (*Бубало Ђ.* Српска земља и поморска у доба владавине Немањића, књига I: Од Сабора у Расу до Сабора у Дежеву. Београд, 2016. С. 125–161).

well as some lands in central Serbia<sup>3</sup>) that she ruled over on her own, as her *država* — a separately governed territory within a monarch's realm, a concept whose first mentions are found in Danilo II's writings, allowing the possibility that she was the first person in Serbia to possess such a significant holding under her governance<sup>4</sup>.

Queen Helen is widely famous as Helen of Anjou, since her Life (*vita*) by Danilo II mentions her French origin, and Charles I and Charles II of Anjou have called her their cousin in several documents<sup>5</sup>. However, she is more likely to have come from a Hungarian branch of the Angles of Constantinople, and was probably the great-niece of Baldwin II of Courtenay<sup>6</sup>. She was canonised by the Orthodox church (although the date of canonisation is disputed, as we shall see later) and is still celebrated in it. However, she might have been a Catholic for the most of her life, converting only in old age<sup>7</sup>: she is known to have had dealings with the Pope and with Ragusa that opposed her husband's politics<sup>8</sup>. She was a prominent patron of both Orthodox and Catholic churches and monasteries both in Serbia and abroad (Mt. Athos, Sinai, Jerusalem)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Копривица М.* «Држава» краљице Јелене // Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка / Ур. Катарина Митровић. Манастир Градац, 2015. С. 13–26; *Поповић М.* Српска краљица Јелена између римокатоличанства и православља. Београд, 2010. С. 46–56.

<sup>4</sup> The word *država* (држава) has several layers of meaning in medieval Serbian law. It comes from the verb *držati*, «to hold», and thus signifies any land or territory under one's power. For that reason, Đuro Daničić had likened its meaning to the Latin *imperium*. Thus, it could mean anything from the lands given to an individual nobleman by the monarch, to the entire country reigned by said monarch. Sometimes, the word «land» was simply used with the same meaning. *Благојевић М.* Држава // Ћирковић С, Михалчић Р. (ур.). Лексикон српског средњег века. Београд, 1999. С. 165–169; *Благојевић М.* Српско краљевство и «државе» у делу Данила II // Немањићи и Лазаревићи и српска средњовековна државност. Београд, 2004. С. 149–173. — In modern Serbian, only the last meaning (that of «state») survives. In English briefly in: *Šarkić S.* A History of Serbian Mediaeval Law. Leiden; Boston, 2023. P. 192, who translates it as «holding, estate».

<sup>5</sup> See e.g.: *Fine J. V. A Jr.* The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth century to the Ottoman Conquest. Ann Arbor, 1994. P. 220, 258; *Поповић М.* Српска краљица Јелена... С. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Her parents were thus John Angelos, ruler of Srem, son of emperor Isaac II, and Matildis, daughter of Peter of Courtenay (*McDaniel G. L.* On Hungarian-Serbian Relations in the Thirteenth Century: John Angelos and Queen Jelena // *Ungarn-Jahrbuch.* 12 (1982–1983). München, 1984. S. 43–50). Previously, Мijatović had stipulated that she could have been Baldwin's niece (*Мijatović Ч.* Ко је краљица Јелена? // *Летопис Матице српске.* 1902. Т. 217. С. 1–30. Cf. *Стојковски Б.* Краљица Јелена и Угарска // *Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка / Ур. Катарина Митровић.* Манастир Градац, 2015. С. 41–48).

<sup>7</sup> Some authors have even stipulated that she never converted, but the descriptions of her death and canonisation, which we shall analyse in this paper, make such a conclusion practically impossible. See e.g.: *Злоковић М.* Градачка црква, задужбина краљице Јелене // *Гласник Скопског научног друштва XV–XVI.* 1936. С. 63, 75–77. — But refuted soon after by *Пурковић, Миодраг Ал.* Авињонске папе и српске земље. Пожаревац: Јадран, 1934. С. 11–12. — More recently, the view that she remained Catholic was expressed by *Erdeljan E.* Two inscriptions from the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus near Shkodër and the question of text and image as markers of identity in Medieval Serbia // *Texts / Inscriptions / Images / Eds. E. Moutafov, J. Erdeljan.* Sofia, 2017. P. 97–110.

<sup>8</sup> *Поповић М.* Српска краљица Јелена... С. 34–45.

<sup>9</sup> *Суботић Г.* Краљица Јелена Анжујска — ктитор црквених споменика у Приморју // *Историјски гласник.* 1958. Т. 1–2. С. 131–148; *Томин С.* Српска краљица Јелена: владарка

At her court in Brnyatsi (*Brnjaci*), she held a scribal workshop dedicated to copying religious books and a school for girls from poor families, where they learned useful skills and would even receive a dowry when it was time for them to marry<sup>10</sup>. While much has been written about this extraordinary woman, there are still mysteries waiting to be solved, and plenty of room for further research<sup>11</sup>. In this paper, we shall inspect the account of the events before and after her death, but focusing on an often neglected, yet important aspect — the role of the Sabor.

### WHAT WAS THE SABOR, AND WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN HELEN'S TIME?

The Sabor was the assembly of medieval Serbia, similar to other protoparliamentary estate institutions in other European countries. Its name means merely «assembly», «gathering», and has thus been used for various organs, including the councils of the Orthodox church. What modern scholars briefly refer to as the «state Sabor» has usually been called the «Sabor of the Serbian land» or «Sabor of the fatherland» in the sources. It is known to have been composed of members of the higher strata of nobility (*vlastela* great and small, but not *vlasteličići*, the lowest and likely most numerous layer) and the clergy — the head of the Serbian Orthodox church (archbishop from 1219, patriarch from 1346), bishops and abbots of important monasteries, and the monarch, who presided over the Sabor. He could be accompanied by his wife or mother, and his son and heir, if he was old enough. There was no «third estate», as citizenry had not yet developed into a political class of its own (although the economic significance of cities was on the rise) before the Ottoman conquest of Serbia. The Sabor had no regular sessions and no fixed place, but was summoned by the monarch in a time of need, whenever and wherever an important decision had to be made, particularly one that affected the fate of the realm or presented a (potential) breach of tradition<sup>12</sup>. In less extraordinary situations, the ruler would only consult his council, much smaller in number and less fixed in composition, consisting of persons whose judgement he found trustworthy and relevant on a given matter<sup>13</sup>.

и монахиња. Нови Сад, 2014. С. 52–64; *Митровић К.* Краљица Јелена и бенедиктинске традиције у Приморју // Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка / Ур. Катарина Митровић. Манастир Градац, 2015. С. 65–81; *Цветковић Б.* Краљица Јелена и фрањевци // Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка... С. 119–135.

<sup>10</sup> Mijatović particularly praises this. *Mujatović, Ч.* Ко је краљица Јелена? С. 3. It is uncertain whether the girls were taught only housekeeping skills, or they also received a more academic education. *Томин С.* Српска краљица Јелена... С. 10–16.

<sup>11</sup> Of more recent works on her, see *Поповић, М.* Српска краљица Јелена... 119 с.; *Митровић К.* (ур.). Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка. Манастир Градац, 2015. 198 с. — In English see: *Marinković, Sedomila.* Helen Nemanjić (?–1314) // Encyclopedia. 2022. Т. 2. Р. 14–25. [https://DOI 10.3390/encyclopedia2010002](https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia2010002)

<sup>12</sup> See more on the Sabor in: *Тарановски Т.* Историја српског права у немањићкој држави. Београд, 1996. С. 225–262; *Радојчић Н.* Српски државни сабори у средњем веку. Београд, 1950. 318 с.; *Ђирковић С., Благојевић М.* Збор // Ђирковић С., Михаљчић Р. (ур.) Лексикон српског средњег века. Београде, 1999. С. 222–228; *Благојевић М.* Српски сабори и сабори отачаства Немањића и Лазаревића // Глас Српске академије наука и уметности: Одељење историјских наука. 2008. Књ. 14. No. CDX. С. 1–40; in English: *Kršljanin N.* Interrupted evolution: The Serbian medieval assembly (Sabor) // *Parliaments, Estates & Representation.* 2017. Vol. 37. No. 1. Р. 1–16, as well as: *Šarkiћ S.* A History... Р. 178–184, who translates it as «Council».

<sup>13</sup> *Веселиновић А.* Савет // Ђирковић С., Михаљчић Р. (ур.). Лексикон српског средњег века. Београд, 1999. С. 637–639; *Тарановски Т.* Историја... С. 255–257.

Probably the most famous result of the Sabor's activity was the passing of the Code (or Codification) of the Emperor Stefan Dušan, Helen's great-grandson, in 1349, and its amendment in 1354<sup>14</sup>. That is, at the same time, the only case (or two cases) of formal legislation on the Sabor — as well as the first legal code adopted by the Serbian state. (The *Zakonopravilo* or Nomocanon of Saint Sava, a compilation of Byzantine (Rhomaian) canon law and imperial laws, was passed in 1219, but by the archbishop Sava, and it is unclear to which extent, if at all, its lay norms were applied in practice<sup>15</sup>). In Helen's day, however, the Sabor wasn't yet a legislative organ.

Important charters could be passed in it — in fact, the mention of the Sabor in charters begins in King Uroš's time and the only known Sabor during his reign involved a reconfirmation of the charter to the monastery of St. Peter on the Lim, issued by Stefan the First-Crowned<sup>16</sup>. However, the King could also pass charters on his own, and for the most part did so. What was brought forth before the Sabor was mostly a matter of political discretion. Some unwritten rules existed, however: it seems that all rulers who legitimately<sup>17</sup> took the throne were crowned before the Sabor, and other similar changes took place there as well, such as Stefan Nemanja's abdication and appointing of heir, but also, it seems, the treaty of Deževa between Dragutin and Milutin<sup>18</sup>. The election of a new archbishop was also performed by the Sabor, with no exceptions. A matter of utmost import for both Church and state was also regularly undertaken before the Sabor: the canonisation of members of the ruling dynasty and sanctification of their places of rest. It is precisely one such case that we are concerned with here — albeit specific, as the deceased hadn't been a ruling monarch, but a queen mother.

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<sup>14</sup> For the role of the Sabor in legislation, see: *Недељковић Б. М.* О саборима и законодавној делатности у Србији у време владавине цара Стефана Душана, са посебним освртом на доношење законика цара Стефана Душана // Беговић М. (ур.) Законик цара Стефана Душана, књига I: Струшки и Атонски рукопис, Београд, 1975. С. 25–61. — The view that the Code of Dušan, the Abbreviated Syntagma of Matthew Blastares and the so-called Law of Justinian are parts of a tripartite codification was firmly established by Solovyov almost a century ago (*Соловјев А. В.* Законодавство Стефана Душана, цара Срба и Грка. Скопље: Скопско научно друштво, 1928. 250 с.), and is now widely accepted. Briefly in English in: *Šarkić S.* A History... P. 19–28.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g.: *Мирковић З. С.* Правни поредак у Српској краљевини у XIII и XIV веку (О односу између обичајних и византијских правних норми и о улози владара) // Краљевство и архиепископија у српским и поморским земљама Немањића / Ур. Љубомир Максимовић, Срђан Пириватрић. Београд, 2019. С. 383–411. — However, it does seem that the passing of the *Zakonopravilo* was a part of a joint reform of the two brothers at the head of the Serbian state and church — Stefan the First-Crowned and St. Sava (on that, with a focus on Stefan's innovative charters, see: *Криљанин Н.* Краљ као заштитник цркве: правна анализа Жичких повеља Стефана Првовенчаног // Краљевство и архиепископија... С. 413–439), so at least some form of application of its Rhomaian laws should not be ruled out outright.

<sup>16</sup> *Радојчић Н.* Српски државни сабори... С. 83–84, 87–88.

<sup>17</sup> *Радојчић Н.* stipulates that the ecclesiastical element of the Sabor tacitly accepted rulers who took the throne otherwise (mostly with the support of at least a sufficient part of the nobility), but that it would not give its blessing for a formal coronation (*Радојчић Н.* Српски државни сабори... С. 84–90).

<sup>18</sup> *Радојчић Н.* Српски државни сабори... С. 91–93.

### On the source: Danilo II, the Queen and her Life

Danilo (Daniel) II, Serbian archbishop in 1324–1337, author of *Helen's Life*, was not merely someone who was bound by his position to write the life of a newly canonised saint from the royal dynasty: he had also had a very long personal relationship with the deceased queen. Thus, his *Life* was based not on oral and written tradition, but on first-hand personal experience. It is part of a greater work, known as the *Lives of Serbian Kings and Archbishops* or *Danilo's Miscellany of Serbian Kings and Archbishops*, begun by Danilo and continued most likely by his pupils after his death<sup>19</sup>. It is worth noting that Saint Helen's life was likely the first to be written, and it may have been circulated separately before further *Lives* were written: it is, in fact, uncertain whether the collection was his idea or not, and if yes, which *Lives* had he envisioned in it. Still, as a compilation of biographies of both rulers and high clergy, it knows no contemporary parallel<sup>20</sup>.

A nobleman by birth, but devoted to a monastic path, a skilled diplomat and even warrior (in charge of the defence of the Holy Mount and Hilandar from the Catalan company), Danilo was well-versed in matters both ecclesiastical and worldly<sup>21</sup>. While, of course, all medieval *vitae* follow certain hagiographic *topoi* to a greater or lesser extent, and there is no doubt that Danilo's texts also served to justify king Milutin and his heirs' right to the throne, the text of the *Lives* still has a significant historiographical dimension, and its reliability as a source has been confirmed by scholars through the years<sup>22</sup>. However, there are silences that must be kept in mind, most notably Helen's Catholicism: beyond implicating it in mentioning her French origin, Danilo never says that she used to be a Catholic, nor does he mention her patronage of Catholic churches<sup>23</sup>. As too inconvenient for both the Orthodox and the political purposes

<sup>19</sup> The original was first published as: *Даничић Ђ. (изд.). Животи краљева и архиепископа српских, написао архиепископ Данило и други.* Загреб: Светозар Галц, 1866. XV+386 с. — Two editions in modern Serbian exist: *Архиепископ Данило II. Животи краљева и архиепископа српских* (прев. Лазар Мирковић, предг. Никола Радојчић). Београд, 1935. XXX+308 с., which follows Daničić's text closely, and *Данило Други. Животи краљева и архиепископа српских. Службе* (прир. Гордон Мак Данијел, Дамњан Петровић). Београд: Просвета / СКЗ, 1988. 337 с., which represents the same translation, modernly edited. A modern critical edition is currently being prepared.

<sup>20</sup> *Шпадијер И. Данилов зборник // Свет српске рукописне књиге (XII–XVII век).* Београд, 2016. С. 358–359; *Јовановић Т. Два преписа Даниловог зборника краљева и архиепископа српских пореклом из румунских земаља // Исходишта.* 2020. Т. 6. С. 143–144.

<sup>21</sup> More on Danilo in: *Радојчић Н. Предговор: О архиепископу Данилу II и његовим настављачима // Архиепископ Данило II. Животи...* С. V–XII; *Мак Данијел Г. Данило Други // Данило Други. Животи...* С. 9–24; texts in: *Ђурић В. Ј. (ур.) Архиепископ Данило II и његово доба.* Београд, 1991. 495 с.; *Шебек Ђ. Ктиторска делатност архиепископа Данила II: Докторска дисертација.* Београд, 2016. 647 с. — In English, an excellent source is: *Thomson F. J. Archbishop Daniel II of Serbia: Hierarch, Hagiographer, Saint. With Some Comments on the Vitae regum et archiepiscoporum Serbiae and the Cults of Mediaeval Serbian Saints // Analecta Bollandiana.* 1993. Т. 111 (1–2). Р. 103–134.

<sup>22</sup> *Радојчић Н. Предговор...* С. XXIV–XXIX.

<sup>23</sup> *Цвитковац Н. П. Архиепископ Данило II, «хришћанска вера» и фрањевци // Баштина,* св. 44. 2018. С. 129–130.



of the text, these facts were quietly omitted<sup>24</sup>. Also, the information on Helen's early life is very scarce, with the focus of the Life being on her later years, benefiting churches and the poor, prayers and monasticism. With this, as Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić claims, Danilo used the model of a monastic Life to constitute a new form of a ruler's *vita*<sup>25</sup>.

It must be particularly pointed out that Danilo knew the role and the significance of the Sabor well from personal experience. In 1316 (after Helen's death, but before her Life was completed), Archbishop Sava III passed away and it was time to name his heir. Danilo was King Milutin's candidate: however, he was not favoured by the majority of the Sabor. It took three sessions of the Sabor until the new archbishop — the opposing candidate, Nicodim, abbot of Hilandar — was elected. While opinions have been voiced that this is merely a trope of Nicodim's modesty not letting him accept the honour without some amount of convincing (with Radojčić going as far as to deny the existence of all three Sabors that Danilo speaks of<sup>26</sup>), the prevailing scholarly opinion is that the opposition was real and that the Sabor could exert actual influence of its own, although, of course, the key was more in the strength of opinions voiced than a later-day majority vote<sup>27</sup>.

#### THE FIRST SABOR: THE QUEEN FEELS DEATH APPROACHING

Danilo recounts that Helen, at that point already a nun (having taken her vows in a previous episode of illness) was residing at her court in Brnjaci when her illness took a turn for the worse and she realised that death was near. She then assembled the monks and noblemen who were already at her court and informed them of her impending death, whereupon they cried and grieved. Danilo then continues:

«И си блежена оутѣши ихъ всечестнѣ сладкыми глаголы оустъ своихъ, и въ тѣ часъ ни мало закъснѣвши начеть въсылати вѣстники въ висоу землю дръжавы своеѣ, къ епископомъ же и игоуменомъ и елико сильныхъ дръжавы еѣ, писаниемъ рекъши: приидѣте, о любимици, и видите прѣставленіе мое; въ поуть бо идоу, въ нѣже николиже не ходихъ. И елико слышавъшихъ таковыѣ глаголы сеѣ (госпожде своеѣ и благоѣ питательнице), рекоу възлюбленіи, подобно бысть томуу я ко въ оно врѣме, югда бысть прѣставленіе богоматере, апостоли облакы по въздоху възхыштаѣми идѣахоу на погребеніе еѣ, такожде бо и въ прѣставленіе сеѣ блаженѣ бысть, мнѣ грѣшномуу мнѣть се, за толико скоро оуслышаніе всеѣ землѣ дръжавы сеѣ христолюбивѣ я ко доуху светомуу висоудоу провъзвѣстившоу ити скоро на прѣставленіе сеѣ блаженѣ, тако бо въ истинуу бѣ видѣти мн отъ висоудоу идоуштинхъ елико соуште славныхъ, такожде и ништи и страннии, хромии же и слѣпни, имѣже бѣ питательница сия блежена госпожда моя. И всемоу събору сръбьскыѣ землѣ събравшоу се къ нѣи въ славныи дворъ еѣ зовомыи Бръняци, и мнѣ оубо съмѣреному Данилоу соуштоу въ то врѣме епископоу цръкве светааго апостола христова и прѣвоученика архидиякона Стефана въ мѣстѣ рекомѣмъ Баньска, и яко слышахъ о прѣставленіи сеѣ блаженѣ, скоро потытавъ се елико сила

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<sup>24</sup> While the motive of regret and repentance for past sins is present throughout the Life, it is not necessarily an allusion to Helen's Catholic past, as it is a fairly common eschatological *topos*, and frequent in Danilo's Lives. Cf. *Костич Т. А. С. Есхатолошки оквир владарских житија архиепископа Данила Другог // Наука без граница. 2018. С. 241–245.*

<sup>25</sup> *Марјановић-Душанић С. Свети краљ: Култ Стефана Дечанског. Београд, 2007. С. 139–140, 146–147.*

<sup>26</sup> *Радочић Н. Српски државни сабори... С. 98–101.*

<sup>27</sup> *Благојевић М. Српски сабори... С. 14–15; Мирковић З. С. Српска правна историја. С. 33–35.*

и обрѣтохъ се тоу съ прочими братиями, єпископы же архиманьдриты и игоумены и всєго събора отъчєствия їєіє»<sup>28</sup>.

«And this blessed one comforted them most honourably with the sweet words of her mouth, and at that moment, not being even a little late, began sending out messengers into all the lands of her holding (*država*), to bishops and abbots and all the mighty ones of her holding, having said in writing: ‘Come, o my beloved ones, and see my passing; for I am going on a journey I had never taken before.’ And all who heard such words of her, their Lady and mild nurturess, I’ll say beloved, were akin to that when in the time of the passing of the Mother of God, Apostles, snatched by clouds in the air, went to her funeral; it was the same at the passing of this blessed one, it seems so to me, sinful one, that all the lands of the holding of this Christ-loving one have heard of this so quickly, as if the Holy Ghost had brought the news everywhere for all to go to the passing of this blessed one, and so I had truly seen glorious one’s going from all over, but also beggars and wanderers, the lame and the blind, as this blessed Lady of mine had been their nurturess. And all the Sabor of the Serbian land having been assembled by her in her glorious court called Brnyatsi, and I, humble Daniel, having been at that time bishop in the church of the Holy Apostle of Christ and protomartyr archdeacon Stephen in the place called Ban’ska, and as I heard of the passing of this blessed one, I hurried quickly as much as I could and found myself there among the other brothers, bishops, archimandrites and abbots and all the Sabor of her fatherland».

The vivid comparison of the invited nobles and clergy rushing to the Queen’s deathbed as the Apostles did to that of the Mother of God is, of course, no coincidence. Not only was she the most widely recognised female holy figure, and thus appropriate for comparisons with a female saint-to-be, but Queen Helen’s endowment, Gradac, was dedicated to her. Thus, the Life underlines Helen’s link to her heavenly patron<sup>29</sup>.

The text creates a dilemma if this was truly the Sabor of the entire Serbian land, as Danilo calls it at one point in the middle of the text, or just a local, regional one, a Sabor of her *država*, as he points out in other instances in the passage. The «Sabor of her fatherland» could also be interpreted in both ways: as referring to the lands under her rule or the entire country. However, the dichotomy seems to be a false one. The reference to «all the Sabor of the Serbian land» is the only point in the text that might imply the state Sabor: all the others refer beyond a doubt to the Queen’s own lands. As Radojčić points out, Danilo is precise in not mentioning the metropolitan, who wasn’t under Helen’s jurisdiction, among those invited. Still, moved by the inspiring comparison with the Dormition of the Mother of God, Danilo must have — or so Radojčić assumes — been carried by his zeal, and thus exaggeratedly wrote of the Sabor of the entire Serbian land, which was otherwise a common phrase for referring to the state Sabor<sup>30</sup>.

We should point out that this is the first mention of a local Sabor in the sources — which, of course, doesn’t mean that it was the first one that ever took place. On the contrary, Danilo speaks of it as if it were a matter of course: the old Queen, at least, might have summoned such local assemblies before, on occasions less prominent and thus not worthy of including

<sup>28</sup> Даничић Ђ. Животи... С. 87–88. — Symbols representing differences among the preserved manuscripts, marked by Daničić, have been omitted here for simplicity’s sake: where differences are relevant for this analysis, they will be mentioned. The English translations are my own.

<sup>29</sup> Јовић Р. Краљица Јелена: светитељство Истока и Запада // Јелена — краљица, монахиња, светитељка / Ур. Катарина Митровић. Манастир Градац, 2015. С. 176–177.

<sup>30</sup> Рadojčić Н. Српски државни сабори... С. 95–96.

in her Life, focused as it is on her monastic virtues, and not political events. However, the next known local Sabor took place soon after: it seems that King Dragutin also summoned one on his deathbed in 1316 — not including the archbishop, again a telltale sign of its local character<sup>31</sup>. The protagonist sensing and announcing their own death is a frequent point in Serbian medieval Lives, and can be considered a mark of future sainthood<sup>32</sup>.

It also bears mentioning that the text doesn't imply anything being unusual about Helen having her own *država* or holding her own Sabor as a woman. There are no earlier examples of such prominent public roles of women in Serbia<sup>33</sup>. While rulers' wives are mentioned as present in Sabors and councils both before and after Helen's time (her namesake, Empress Helen, Dušan's wife, particularly seems to have been active in that sphere<sup>34</sup>), there are only two other known examples of women *holding* a Sabor, both of a later date and both in the case of temporary absence of a man. One was Queen Mary (*Marija*), presiding over a Sabor gathered to receive important news sent by her husband, Stefan Dečanski, after the battle of Velbazhd in 1330<sup>35</sup>. The other was Princess Milica, acting as a regent during her son's minority, holding a very difficult Sabor after the Battle of Kosovo and the death of her husband, Prince Lazar, in 1389<sup>36</sup>. This could make Queen Helen a pioneer in this respect, and that possibility, together with the fact that Helen's authority is not described as something unusual, merits further research. Even Blagojević, who points out that the role of rulers' wives in Sabors in their absence hasn't been sufficiently studied and speaks of other examples mentioned here, omits to compare them to Helen's local Sabors<sup>37</sup>.

Danilo further writes how Helen, upon hearing of the arrivals, rose from her deathbed and thanked the Lord for letting her see them all before her death. Everyone stood around her (Danilo likens her face to that of an angel or a ray of sunlight) and, as they understood she was about to die, began crying and singing funerary psalms, and Helen took her last communion from Paul, the bishop of Raška (later mentioned to have been her teacher and confessor<sup>38</sup>). She said her prayers, thanking Christ for all the good she had had in her life and praying for her *država* and its people, her sons and the entire world, finishing with a plea to the Lord to preserve those who in the future should celebrate the day of her passing. She then addressed the gathering for the last time, which Danilo describes in the following words:

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<sup>31</sup> The fact that the only occasion was Dragutin's funeral, and that no mention of complex issues of inheritance was raised, does strain the credibility of Danilo's writing in this respect, but that is too big a subject to broach here. *Радојчић Н. Српски државни сабори...* С. 97–98.

<sup>32</sup> *Марјановић-Душанић С. Смрт и светост // Приватни живот у српским земљама средњег века / Ур. Смиља Марјановић-Душанић, Даница Поповић. Београд, 2004. С. 588–589.*

<sup>33</sup> Similarly, she was the first woman in the dynasty known to found monasteries in her own name (*Јовић Р. Краљица Јелена...* С. 179).

<sup>34</sup> *Пурковић Миодраг Ал. Јелена, жена цара Душана. Диселдорф, 1975. С. 9–17.*

<sup>35</sup> *Благојевић М. Српски сабори...* С. 21–22.

<sup>36</sup> Briefly on this in: *Кршљанин Н. В. Государственный собор после битвы на Косовом поле в 1389 г.: Сербия на распутье // Евразийское измерение 2020/2021 / Ред. Сергей Николаевич Бабурин. М., 2021. С. 60–66. — The same text in English: *Kršljanin N. The State Assembly after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389: Serbia at the Crossroads // Вестник Московского университета им. С. Ю. Витте. Серия «Юридические науки». 2021. Вып. 2. С. 11–15.**

<sup>37</sup> *Благојевић М. Српски сабори...* С. 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Даничић Ђ. Животи...* С. 100.



«И всѣмоу събору, елико бѣ прѣдстоющтиихъ прѣдъ лицемъ сея блаженныя, всѣмъ миръ дасть рекоушти: миръ вы, всѣсвятныи чръныци; миръ вы, иереи и всѣ причѣте цръковныи; миръ же и вамъ, чедѣ мои любовьнѣи; миръ же и вамъ, ништии и оубози и маломоштнни, вы бо молисте бога за ме грѣшную и оуслышани бысте. всѣмъ же отъ малыхъ даже и до великихъ съвршено благословеніе даровавши, и всакого ихъ по юдиномоу оутврьдивши сладькими гаголы поучении своихъ, и по сихъ знаменавши се роукою своєю кръстообразно и прирече: господи Иисоусе Христе, въ роуцѣ твои прѣдаю доухъ мой»<sup>39</sup>.

«And to the entire Sabor, those who had stood before the face of this blessed one, she gave peace to all saying: ‘Peace to you, most honourable monks; peace to you, hierarchs and all the clergy of the Church; peace to you as well, my beloved children; peace to you as well, beggars, the poor and the ill, for you had prayed to God for my sinful self and had been heard.’ Having given her perfect blessing to all, even from the small ones to the great ones, and having fortified each of them individually with the sweet words of her teachings, and after this having made the sign of the Cross with her hand, she said: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, into your hands I commit my spirit’».

Naturally, given its hagiographical significance, this part of the text is full of *topoi*. It is quite possible that the old queen did foresee (and indeed plan for) being sainted and celebrated after her death, and made her final words those of a well-known biblical quote<sup>40</sup>. It is, however, equally possible that Danilo wrote an idealised narrative of what a saint’s death should look like. What is important to us is that the text once again emphasises that that the gathering in question is a Sabor, and lists both its ecclesiastical and its lay members (Helen’s ‘beloved children’). The poor and needy are, naturally, not formal participants in the Sabor: their presence serves the purpose of showing Helen as a benefactress of those in need. However, that does not necessarily contradict the gathering being a local Sabor. Given the importance of decisions made in Sabors, as well as their composition of the monarch, nobility and church hierarchy, all of whom had at least a moral Christian obligation to help those in need, it is quite likely that commoners (*sebri*) also frequently flocked to the sidelines of a Sabor, for a chance to hear the news and to receive alms or be offered food in honour of an important event, as we shall see later in the text<sup>41</sup>.

According to Danilo, after Helen’s death, everybody gathered cried after her, and then the bishops took her body and carried her to her endowment, the monastery of Gradac, singing funerary songs along the way in the harsh winter weather. Yet they did not want to proceed with the burial until King Milutin arrived.

### THE SECOND SABOR AND THE ROYAL FUNERAL

They did not have to wait for long before both the archbishop and the king showed up with their retinues. The description of those arriving is already reminiscent of the composition of the Sabor:

«И мало пождавше, пръвѣе прииде прѣосвештеныи архиепископъ киръ Сава вторыи съ всѣмъ причѣтомъ великыи цръкве, по сихъ же прииде и благочестивыи

<sup>39</sup> *Даничић Ђ. Животи...* С. 90.

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 31:5, Luke 23:46. — This is the first mention that Helen expected or somehow knew she would be canonized; we’ll delve more on this soon.

<sup>41</sup> For other similar occasions, see e.g. *Благојевић М. Српски сабори...* С. 25.

краль сынъ блаженые съ всѣми властельми и всѣми сильными своими въ славъ царьсцѣи»<sup>42</sup>.

«And having waited a while, first came the most holy Archbishop kyr Sava the Second, with all the clergy of the great church, after which came the pious King, son of the blessed one, with all the noblemen and all the mighty ones of his in imperial glory».

It goes without saying that it should not be understood that the archbishop literally brought all the clergy in the land with him (and we've already mentioned that it was only the bishops and abbots of royal endowments who regularly attended the Sabor, not clergy of lower rank), nor that the king brought each and every nobleman. However, the description does paint the picture of the heads of church and state bringing each a large number of important people serving under them, very similar to the clerical and the lay part of the Sabor, which those two individuals would normally summon to a given place. The 'imperial glory' (present only in the younger Karlovci manuscript) despite the ruler bearing the title of king might be there either due to Danilo wanting to emphasize the king's power and dignity, or, more likely, a later interpolation (made by one of Danilo's students or a scribe copying the manuscript), perhaps dating from the days of the Serbian Empire, perhaps from the nostalgic time after its fall<sup>43</sup>.

The text then recounts how King Milutin wept over his mother's body, developing into a touching laudatory monologue that does contain many *topoi* of a medieval panegyric<sup>44</sup>, but remains in line with what is known of Helen's activities in life. Afterwards, the funeral proceeded as follows:

«И по сихъ всемоу оуготованиу къ погребениу присгѣвшоу, самъ благочѣстивый и прѣвысокий ть краль Стефанъ Оурошь приємъ роукама своима тѣло блаженые матере своеє госпожде Юлены, и съ прѣосвещенымъ архьхиєпископомъ кирь Савомъ и съ сѣборомъ всеосвещенныхъ єпископъ и игоумень, и несоуште сию съ псалмы и пѣсньми божьствьными къ оуготовану єє гробоу, послѣдоуюштоу всемоу освещеному сѣбороу и царьскому синьклитоу, съ прочиими вельможи и боляри сеє христолюбивые, и всемоу народу отъчества єє, и тако положише и въ оуготованомъ єє гробѣ въ велицѣи и прѣдивьнѣи цркъви прѣсветые дѣви богородице славнааго єє благовѣштениа, юже сама сѣа блаженаа госпожда Юлена отъ основаниа достолѣпнѣ въздвиже. и благочѣстивый и христолюбивый краль Стефанъ Оурошь зѣло прѣмногы милостынє въ ть днь разда єлико прилючише се ништи и страньи и маломоштни въ прѣставлєниє сеє блаженые госпожде матере своеє. и съ всѣмъ же сѣборомъ отъчєствиа своего повеселивъ се доуховьно и тѣлесьно, и паки възврати се къ царьскому прѣстолау своємоу»<sup>45</sup>.

«And after this, all the preparations for the funeral being complete, the pious and most high King Stefan Uroš himself took with his own hands the body of his blessed mother, the Lady Helen, and with the most holy Archbishop kyr Sava and the Sabor of the ever holy bishops and abbots, and carrying her with psalms and divine songs towards her prepared grave, followed by the entire holy Sabor and imperial *synkhit*, with other magnates and noblemen of this Christ-loving one, and all the people of her fatherland, and thus they laid her into the grave prepared for her in the great and beautiful church of the most holy Virgin, the Mother of God, of her glorious Annunciation, which this blessed Lady Helen

<sup>42</sup> Даничић Ђ. Животи... С. 91.

<sup>43</sup> The same goes for the «imperial throne» in the next quote.

<sup>44</sup> Данило Д. Животи... С. 297.

<sup>45</sup> Даничић Ђ. Животи... С. 93.

had splendidly raised herself from the foundation. And the pious and Christ-loving King Stefan Uroš gave away very many alms on that day to those beggars, the poor and the ill who happened to be there at the passing of this blessed Lady, his mother. And with all the Sabor of his fatherland having rejoiced some in spirit and body, he returned again to his imperial throne».

Everyone else also returned to their homes, praising the Holy Trinity and the deceased blessed Helen. Danilo himself remained in Gradac, where, two or three days later, he welcomed a large group of noblemen from Srem, the lands of Stefan Dragutin, who could not make it in time for his mother's passing, and sent all of them to see what has transpired and return to him with the news. From this we learn that the Sabor that had previously been summoned for the funeral by the king and archbishop did not include, at the very least, the nobility (and maybe not the clergy, either) from Dragutin's lands. While it is possible that this was merely a matter of chance and logistics — that Milutin was simply not willing to wait for those coming from afar on such an occasion and held the Sabor and the funeral without them — scholars have also stipulated that Dragutin's absence from his mother's funeral is proof of worsening relations between him and either her, or Milutin<sup>46</sup>. It is also quite possible (regardless of the personal relations in that particular moment) the division of power between the brothers was such that Dragutin's lands were fully separate, not sending their representatives to the main Serbian Sabor.

The character of the «entire holy Sabor and imperial *synklit*» is not clear at first glance, as the latter (*synkletos*) was the term for the emperor's council in Constantinople, the Rhomaian version of the Roman senate, far less formal than the antique one<sup>47</sup>. Radojčić provides useful clues, although he did not differentiate the Sabor after King Milutin's arrival as a separate one and a full state Sabor, but considered it to be a continuation of the local Sabor previously summoned (which cannot be true due to the new participants, and the designation in the end that it is the Sabor of King Milutin's fatherland). In his opinion, Danilo referred to Helen's local assembly and her personal council, «although these latter words could also concern the close council around the ruler»<sup>48</sup>. It seems that Danilo could have meant one of two things, two parts of the Sabor. Theoretically, the «holy Sabor» could be the church dignitaries, and the *synklit* the nobility. But could have been more or less as Radojčić presumed in his second option, just having the entire Sabor in mind: mention of the *synklit* merely highlighting those members of the Sabor closest to the king, who regularly took part in his personal council. This yet again underlines the importance of the occasion.

Slowly drawing his story to a conclusion, Danilo writes how, a while later, Dragutin also visited his mother's grave with his noblemen, wept and gave many gifts to the monastery, and afterwards visited his brother and spent some time with him in love and joy, to the shame of those who meant them ill. Yet some time later, Milutin's wife, Queen Simonis, initiated another visit to Helen's grave along with Dragutin's wife, Catherine (*Katalina*) — again not omitting to weep at the tomb and give valuable gifts to the monastery. While both of Helen's

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<sup>46</sup> See the overview in: *Живковић В. Српски краљеви...* С. 111–115.

<sup>47</sup> More on it in *Tsirpanlis, Constantine N. Byzantine Parliaments and Representative Assemblies from 1081 to 1351 // Byzantion. 1973. Т. 43. Р. 432–481; Kazhdan A. P. (ed.). The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium. In 3 vols. New York; Oxford, 1991. Р. 1868–1870.*

<sup>48</sup> «...иако би се ове последње речи могле тицати и ужега савета око владара» (*Радодјичић Н. Српски државни сабори...* С. 96–97).

daughters-in-law went on their way with many noblemen who served their husbands, and the procession is described in glorious colour and detail, only nobility is mentioned (not clergy), and the gathering is never called a Sabor. Both Dragutin's and the queens' visits to Helen's grave were important enough for Danilo to write down, as they showed accord within the royal family and the importance of the late dowager queen to both sides. Still, neither was important enough to warrant the full summoning of the Sabor: they were not initiated by the ruling monarch<sup>49</sup>, and they did not concern an immediate change in the ruling dynasty. Paying respects to a deceased member of the royal family was important, it was honourable and proper for both living members of the family and for the nobility of the realm to do so, but it was not a matter of state.

### THE THIRD SABOR: TRANSFER OF THE (HOLY) QUEEN'S RELICS (TRANSLATIO)

The final matter of state took place three years later. Danilo explains how Helen appeared in the dream of an unnamed old monk in Gradac, saying: «По неже оть селѣ не благоволихъ жити въ тимѣнии земьнѣмь, богъ бо тако повелѣваеъ изети се тѣло моемоу оть бокоу земьноу и прѣдълежати ми прѣдъ лицемъ вашего боголюбиа.» («Since from now on I no longer will to live in the mud of the Earth, God thus commands for my body to be taken out from the side of the Earth and to lay before the face of your love of God»)<sup>50</sup>. Naturally, the abbot and the brotherhood sent messengers to bishop Paul, who arrived, filled with joy at such news, but not quite surprised: Danilo mentions that, being close to him as a spiritual father, Helen had forewarned him of such a sign of her body while she yet lived. This foreshadowing of her own future sainthood, appearing for the second time in the Life, is highly unusual, with no parallel in other Serbian *vitae*, and remains somewhat enigmatic<sup>51</sup>. A modern atheist might see in it a political programme to create Helen's image of sainthood; a medieval reader, however, would rather view it as a sign of God's favour, showing to the blessed queen what will come to pass after her death.

Paul initiated the singing of psalms, reading of holy texts and prayers over Helen's grave, after which:

«...всьемоу събору събраноу боголюбивааго отъчѣствия ея, и тако отъврѣзше ракоу, идѣже бѣ погребено светоу тѣло ея въ земли; и обрѣтоше ея яко въ росѣ лежеште светымъ миромъ оумаштено цѣло нерастлимо божиємъ повелѣниемъ ничѣтоже врѣждено. и яко єдинѣми оусты възпише хвалоу вьседръжителю богу»<sup>52</sup>.

«...the entire Sabor of her fatherland being gathered, they thus opened the grave, where her holy body was entombed in the earth; and they found it lying as if in dew, anointed with holy myrrh, whole, imperishable, by God's will uninjured by anything. And as if by one mouth, they cried praise to God almighty»<sup>53</sup>.

After that they removed Helen's body from the tomb, singing psalms and songs, commanded for a special casket to be made, and placed her body in it, wrapped in goodly

<sup>49</sup> In the case of Helen's own deathbed Sabor, she can be considered the monarch, as it concerned only her lands.

<sup>50</sup> *Даничић Ђ. Животи...* С. 99.

<sup>51</sup> *Марјановић-Душанић С. Свети краљ.* С. 144–145.

<sup>52</sup> *Даничић Ђ. Животи...* С. 100.

<sup>53</sup> The last epithet is more literally «God, ruler of all», i. e. Pantocrator.

fragrances, and transferred it to a new place, outside the altar doors, before the icon of Christ Pantocrator. (Sadly, the body's resting place is now unknown, as it was likely hidden during the Ottoman conquest.) It would seem that the Sabor described in this section was a local Sabor again, that of Helen's *država*, as it is described as «Sabor of her fatherland», neither the king nor archbishop are mentioned, and the events seem to be progressing at a pace too quick for the entire Serbian Sabor to be gathered.

The transfer of a saint's relics was a key moment for the establishment of a cult, and thus traditional Serbian historiography considered that it was then that Helen was canonised. In recent decades, this has been seriously disputed: Danica Popović was the first to notice that although the transfer of relics followed the rules of those for saints, Helen's cult didn't seem to be founded yet, as no service was written for her, Danilo doesn't mention any miracles and keeps referring to her as the «blessed one» (*blažena*), and never «holy/saint» (*sveta*)<sup>54</sup>. Branislav Todić elaborated this further, underlining that «blessed» doesn't have the same meaning as the Latin «beatus» in the Catholic church and is not used for saints, but for people who live according to Evangelical virtues. He further showed that Danilo is very careful in his writings regarding whom he calls saint and whom blessed, and that not only no miracles, but also no prayer calls typical for the addressing of saints are present in the Life of Helen, nor those of Dragutin and Milutin. He concludes that these Lives can be considered the preparation for the establishment of the cult, but not evidence of one already in place. Helen's cult was likely started only in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century by Vissarion, metropolitan of Ras, who wrote (or rather adapted) celebratory texts dedicated to her<sup>55</sup>.

However, even if Helen wasn't canonised yet, the *translatio* of 1317 nevertheless had significant political implications. The history of medieval Serbia is rich in important moments tied to the transfer of relics, from the transfer of St. Simeon's (Stefan Nemanja's) relics to Serbia from Hilandar in 1206/1207, resulting in the end of civil war and peace between the brothers Stefan and Vukan, to the transfer of the relics of the Apostle Luke from Epirus to Serbia (Smederevo) in 1453, in Đurađ Branković's final attempt to defend the country against the Ottoman conquest by both military and otherworldly means<sup>56</sup>. While Queen Helen might not have been a figure as central to Serbian political and religious history as canonised male monarchs had been, her significance in life — as a queen consort and dowager, mother of two kings, political player, ruler of her own lands, patron of the Church and culture — merited significance in death and beyond.

In her categorisation of the cults of holy rulers in Serbia, Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić places the cult of St. Helen into the category of monastic cults, but only partially, leaning towards dynastic cults. It seems clear that Helen was a sufficient factor in state and politics that this significance had to do with her road to sainthood<sup>57</sup>. A local Sabor of her realm saw her off into both the afterlife and the first steps towards canonisation: the Sabor of the entire Serbian state

<sup>54</sup> Поповић Д. Српски владарски гроб у средњем веку. Београд, 1992. С. 83.

<sup>55</sup> Тодић Б. Н. Култ градачке ктиторке краљице и монахиње Јелене // Саопштења Л. 2018. С. 33–50. — Some rare instances of «saint/holy» in the text, such as the «holy body» in our last quote from the Life, appear only in later manuscripts (here, again, the younger Karlovci manuscript) and can thus be considered to be interpolations.

<sup>56</sup> Михаљчић Р. Пренос моштију // Ћирковић С., Михаљчић Раде (ур.) Лексикон српског средњег века. Београд, 1999. С. 579–580.

<sup>57</sup> Марјановић-Душанић С. Свети краљ. С. 98–99, 146–147.



bid farewell as she was entombed. She is one of only three female saints from medieval Serbia (the others being St. Ana and St. Angelina), and the only one of them to have received a Life of her own, as well as a formal transfer of relics<sup>58</sup>. Her political and historical significance seems to be the greatest, and that is why events surrounding her death had both an essential and a formal importance for the contemporary Serbian state and society.

Информация о статье

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**Заголовок:** Death of St. Helen of Anjou and the Sabor [Смерть Святой Елены Анжуйской и Сабор]

**Резюме:** Автор Жития Святой Елены, королевы Сербии (?–1314) — архиепископ Даниил II, ее современник. В своем сочинении в связи со смертью королевы он рассказывает о заседаниях трех соборов. Первый собор создала сама Елена, предчувствуя приближение кончины. Описание сбора приглашенных сопоставляется с сюжетом из предания о земной жизни Богородицы — он и другие приглашенные спешили к королеве, как апостолы к Богородице в пору ее Вознесения. В современной историографии считается, что первый собор был местным и состоял из бояр и церковных сановников только тех земель, которыми Елена управляла по праву вдовствующей королевы. Второй собор, скорее всего, являлся собором всего сербского государства. Он созван после смерти, на похороны Елены, и возглавлял собор ее сын, король Милутин. Третий, вероятно, местный собор состоялся три года спустя. Он созывался для переноса мощей. Скорее всего, в этот момент начался процесс канонизации Елены. В настоящей статье проанализированы описания данных Соборов, определяется их значение для возникающего культа Святой Елены, определяется их место в истории сербского средневекового государства.

**Ключевые слова:** королева Елена, Даниил II, житие, собор, средневековая Сербия, история церкви

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**Title:** Death of St. Helen of Anjou and the Sabor

**Abstract:** In his Life of Saint Helen, Queen of Serbia (?–1314), Archbishop Danilo II, her contemporary, speaks of three sessions of the Sabor surrounding her death. The first was summoned by Helen herself when she felt her end approaching: Danilo describes himself and the others summoned rushing to her like the Apostles did at the time of the Assumption of the Mother of God. Modern scholarship believes this assembly to have been a local one, composed of the nobility and church dignitaries only of the lands that Helen held as queen dowager. The second, likely the entire Sabor of the Serbian state, was assembled after her death, for her funeral, headed by her son, King Stefan Uroš Milutin. The third, likely local again, took place three years later for the transfer of her relics, likely initialising (but not yet completing) her canonisation. This paper aims to analyse Danilo's depiction of these assemblies and their significance both for Saint Helen's cult-in-the-making and for the medieval Serbian state.

**Keywords:** Queen Helen, Danilo (Daniel) II, Life (*vita*), Sabor (Assembly), medieval Serbia

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