RESEARCH QUERY:

ANTECEDENTS OF QUEEN HELENA 'THE BYZANTINE', CONSORT OF INGE I OF SWEDEN

by M. Sjöström[1]

The author reviews the scant primary material concerning Queen Helena of Sweden. He discusses the Greek onomastics relating to her name and those of her offspring, and enquires whether anyone knows any primary or near-contemporary sources, particularly around Constantinople or Russia, that would shed light on her antecedents.

*Foundations (2008) **2** (5): 375-378* *© Copyright FMG and the author*

Helena regina

As far as I know from historical material, there are very few primary sources about Helena. Practically nothing is known with any certainty beyond her first name, her daughters, and her support of monasteries. She is mentioned as wife of King Inge in a later compilation of lists of donations to the Vreta convent (Ahnlund, 1946). And, she is mentioned in the genealogy of William of Ebelholt, from 1194 (Gertz). None of these are exactly contemporary.

King Inge I of Sweden, a staunch Christian, who ascended the Swedish throne c.1080, probably as co-ruler with his brother King Halsten, was occasionally (at least c.1084-87) deposed of kingship and/or limited to rule only the western part of Swedish Gothenland. Later genealogies record his wife as Helena (*fl.*1080s).

It appears that Inge had spent some of his youth somewhere in what today is Russia, presumably with his royal relatives there. This may have been in Novgorod, in the town of Ladoga, in Kiev, or perhaps even in the Byzantine Empire. It cannot be excluded that Inge may have served in the Varangian Guard.

When Inge returned to Sweden to ascend the throne, it is believed he already had Helena as wife, as far as is known his first wife. Helena is a Greek name and before her time was not in use in Scandinavia. Although it has been assumed that Helena originated from Russia, nowhere is it attested whether she was from Russia or from some other, presumably orthodox, Christian country.

Baptismal names from the Byzantine culture

A nephew of Inge born around that time, one of the sons of King Halsten Stenkilsson of Sweden, was given the Greek baptismal name Philip (later becoming King Filip Halstensson, d.1118).

It is well-recorded in Norse legends that King Inge I's three daughters were Kristina, Margareta and Katarina, born in the last decades of the 11th century, probably in the 1080s. None of these names had been recorded in use in Sweden previously. They

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are Greek Orthodox baptismal names, which lends strong support to the view that their mother was of Greek or other Christian Orthodox extraction, particularly given that their father was not.[2]

Helena is believed to have been the mother of the three girls. She is mentioned as mother of two of them, Kristina and Margareta, in the genealogies authored a century later by abbot William of Ebelholt, the Aebelholt monastery (published by Gertz in *Scriptores Minores Historiae Danicae Medii Aevi*), who refers to her as '*Helena regina*'.

Inge's son, Ragvald, got a traditional Scandinavian name (in contrast to his first cousin, Philip, see above). The naming pattern of Helena and Inge's children, girls Greek and boy Scandinavian, suggests a division of responsibility between parents: the father gets to choose the boy's name, the mother the girls'.[3]

Queen Helena, contrary to oft-repeated later claims, was in all likelihood not Saint Elin of Skövde (Elin is a colloquial Scandinavian rendition of the name Helena), patron saint of the province of Western Gothenland ('St.Helen of Sköfde' in the catholic encyclopedia). The saint lived in the 12th century, and became a popular saint in Scandinavia. Chronologically it seems more likely that Elin of Skövde acquired her baptismal name from Queen Helena, who apparently was the one to introduce her own baptismal name to Scandinavia. Perhaps Queen Helena was Elin of Skövde's godmother or some such.

From this reconstruction, it comes through as highly likely that Queen Helena imported these Greek names into Scandinavia, initially to Sweden. This was quite

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[2] It is usually only in fiction, not in historical material, where the names Margaret, Catherine, Christina and Helena are assigned to Scandinavian ladies who were adults before the 12th century. Such fantasy names can be seen as outcomes of retrospective fiction: as these names were very popular in Scandinavia in the later Middle Ages. A fiction writer could have a misconception that they were already in use in the Viking era, which was not the case.

Fifty years or so before Helena, a Danish royal, Estrid Svendsdatter, half-sister of King Canute II of Denmark and England (Canute the Great), mother of King Sweyn IV of Denmark, and fiancee or wife of a Duke of Normandy in the 1010s, may have been addressed as 'Margaret' in some context or other. The chronicle of Adam of Bremen (a contemporary of Helena) at least in one of its later editions, mentions 'Margaret' as the name of the royal lady who on genealogical grounds must have been the well-known Estrid. If she really was so called, then she may have been the first Scandinavian with the name Margaret. However, the name Margaret was not 'inherited' by her descendants, which militates against the accuracy of Adam of Bremen's nomenclature.

In the first half of the 12th century, Margret Haakonsdottir of Orkney (*Mairghread inghen Haco*) is recorded as the daughter of Earl Haco of Caithness and Orkney, as wife of Matad mac Maelmuire, Mormaer of Atholl, and as mother of Earl Aralt mac Mataidh (b.c.1130), long-time Mormaer of Caithness, Lord of Shetland and Jarl of Orkney. It is equally possible that her baptismal name came through Scotland, where Queen Margaret, later canonized, had flourished in latter half of the 11th century; as to have come through Norse connections with Sweden, namely Helena's daughter Margret Ingesdottir had been Norway's queen-consort between c.1101 and 1103 and thus wife of Earl Haco's Norwegian one-time supreme liege lord.

[3] It is of course possible (but unlikely) that King Inge I himself, despite his Scandinavian ancestry, had just become enthusiastic for Greek names, so that his one nephew and all his daughters were given those. The fact that his son Ragvald was not named in this tradition would be inconsistent with the idea of King Inge I being the inspiration for Byzantine cultural names. In this unlikely scenario, the cultural origin of Helena as Inge I's wife is irrelevant and she could as well be a Scandinavian. However given that her own baptismal name was not yet in recorded in use in Scandinavia it hints more strongly of a Greek cultural influence and suggests that Helena was not native Scandinavian.

early, compared for example with their arrival in Germany which appears to have been much later. Such female names of Greek origin were to become highly popular from then on up until the present day. In high medieval Scandinavia, through late medieval to modern times, Kristina,[4] Margareta[5] and Katarina,[6] have been ever-present, and in large numbers, as well as the name Helena itself.[7]

These names then diffused to an expanding area, passing among Scandinavian countries through marriages of Helena's daughters and their issue and probably also through their acquaintances, moving then for example to northern Germany and so on. It is very clear that these names did not migrate from Scandinavia to Russia (nor from Scandinavia to the Anglo-Saxon and Scots royal family). The direction of migration on the contrary was from the east towards Scandinavia.

Helena's presumed act in introducing a handful of Greek names into the onomastic fund of her country (Sweden) by marriage in the 1080s resembles the importation of names like Margaret, Christina, Mary, David and Alexander to the British Isles through the family of Edward Atheling in 1050s (presumably by his wife, Agatha). Margaret and Christina (baptized in the 1040s), daughters of Agatha, were presumably kinswomen of either Inge I or Helena the Byzantine or both. Naming Helena's two eldest daughters as their namesakes in the 1080s may also reflect such a family background.

These choices of baptismal names for the children gives a clear signal that Helena was a scion of Greek and orthodox Christian culture, *i.e.* Byzantine. This is compatible with the idea that she came from the east with her husband King Inge I, as well compatible with her own baptismal name, of obviously Greek origin. Her status as a scion and disseminator of Byzantine culture is why I have designated this lady as 'Helena the Byzantine'.

Other possibilities for Helena's origin

If Helena's husband King Inge I descended from king Olof of Sweden,[8] as is widely believed and indeed likely in view of his succession to kingship, then according to the consanguinity restrictions of the canon law (in that era, forbidden up to the seventh degree), Helena cannot without dispensation have been a descendant of Ingegerd of Sweden, wife of Jaroslav I of Kiev. Chronologically, Helena would be of the generation of grandchildren of Ingegerd. Even if Inge were not a direct descendant of King Olof, he almost certainly descended from Ingegerd's Swedish kin in some more remote way. No such dispensation for Helena's marriage, nor a known situation of

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4 Christine, Kirsten, Kerstin, Kristin, Kirsti, Kristina, Christina etc.

5 Margrethe, Merete, Märta, Margret, Marketta, Margareta etc., derivations of the Greek name Margarita

6 Cathrine, Catharina, Karen, Karin, Kari, Kaarina, Katarina etc., derivations of the Greek Ekaterini

7 Helene, Ellen, Lene, Lena, Elin, Elina, Helena, etc.

8 It depends whether Inge I's mother was the daughter of King Emund Olofsson, a genealogical link unconfirmed in near-contemporary material. *Hervarar saga*, itself unreliable, only mentions that King Stenkil married the daughter of King Emund of Sweden. This does not necessarily mean that she became the mother of Inge, although it creates a presumption.

consanguinity between these spouses, is mentioned anywhere in sources known to me [9].

The identification of Helena's parentage seems impossible with the available historical knowledge. There may have been high noble families in Russia other than the rulers of Kiev, which could provide a suitable family origin for Helena. But connections with Byzantium were also close. Helena may as well have been a Greek lady rather than a Rus. On the basis of the sources that I know of, we cannot know for sure. In the 1040s, the Byzantine lady 'Monomakhine' came to Kiev, to marry Vsevolod Jaroslavich (she became mother of Vladimir the Monomakh, father of Mstislav of Kiev, d.1132). Although they are highly unlikely to be 'Monomakhine's close blood relatives,[9] Helena (born in the 1050s at the latest) or her parent, if Greek, may well have come to Russia in a similar way.

In the somewhat error-ridden *Hervarar saga*, King Inge I is said to have been married at some stage to a lady simply identified by the name "*Maer*" (which could mean simply a maiden, though alternatively it could be a proper first name or a degenerate or abbreviated first name), sister of Blot-Sweyn, the heathen king (presumably indigenous) who for a period supplanted Inge I as ruler of "Upper Sweden", being opposed to the Christian religion. This has led some to identify Helena as Sweyn's sister. Sweyn's family religion and probable antecedents are in practically total conflict with Helena's onomastic, religious and cultural identity. Those who assume that Helena was Swedish, do not offer any explanation of the import of the orthodox culture baptismal names, or Helena's devotion to the Christian religion, quite apart from Helena's own name which had not been used previously in Scandinavia. I conclude therefore that it is highly unlikely that Helena was Blot-Sweyn's sister.

The purpose of this short article is to enquire whether anyone knows any other primary or near-contemporary sources, or any other reliable material, to shed more light on knowledge, or even legitimate speculation, about the antecedents of queen-consort Helena of the Swedes and the Gauts.

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[for a modern edition see: *Reprografisk genudgivet og forlagt af Selskabet for Udgivelse af Kilder til Dansk Historie* (Copenhagen, 1970).]

Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs, [for an English translation see: Tolkien, Christopher (1960). *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons.]

[9] Moreover, the marriage of Kristina, one of Helena's daughters, to Mstislav of Kiev, d.1132, a great-grandson of Ingegerd and Jaroslav, further discounts the possibility of any close genealogical link between Helena and Ingegerd, or with 'Monomakhine'. However, Mstislav who was a fourth-generation descendant of Olof of Sweden, was probably in any case consanguineous with his spouse Kristina, who. as explained above. may have been a fourth-generation descendant of king Olof via her father, or was at the very least related more remotely.