

ZABEL, QUEEN OF CILICIA, AND HER TIME

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So many centuries after the Lusignans¹ it is worth trying to reconstruct the figure of Queen Zabel of Cilician Armenia, whose mother was the daughter of King Amaury II Lusignan of Cyprus.

Zabel is the only queen to have reigned in the Cilician Kingdom of Armenia, and the second in the entire history of Armenia, after Erato,² to have been queen in her own right. It was Zabel who inherited her father's, Levon the Great's, throne, and it was through his marriage to her that Hetum became king.

Hetum's and Zabel's reign is considered one of Cilicia's most prosperous. Yet, thirteenth-century historiographers, probably because of their prejudices against women, have written very little, and in a passing manner, about Zabel, and have largely concentrated on Hetum.

Therefore it is worthwhile to bring together the historiographers' scant information about her and to try to define her role in the history of the period.

Zabel's accession to the throne and her marriage

Zabel acceded to the throne of her father under the most complex circumstances. An ingenious king and a valiant soldier,³ Levon had defeated his enemies, extended the frontiers of his country and had founded the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia after being crowned its first king by both the Byzantines and the Franks in 1199.⁴ The conditions of his personal life, however, would create deep uncertainty and keen rivalry at his death. He had been married to Sybille of Antioch and had only one daughter by her, Stephanie or Rita. Queen Sybille had allegedly been disloyal, and the king, upset by the gossip of Catholicos Hovhannes, had imprisoned her in the fortress of Vahka where she had died. Princess Stephanie, or Rita, was in due course married to John of Brienne, the King of Jerusalem, and had a son by him.⁵

Getting old and sick, and without a male heir of his own, Levon had appointed Raymond-Ruben, his brother's grandson, as his successor. Raymond-Ruben's mother Alidz was made to marry, for political reasons, the elder son of Bohemond III of Antioch, on condition that the child resulting from this marriage, if male, would succeed to the thrones of both Antioch and Cilicia. In this way Levon would have secured both his succession and also a friendly Antioch. Next, he had extracted an oath from the Armenian nobles that they would loyally serve Raymond-Ruben after his death.⁶ But the other pretender to the succession to Antioch, the Count of Tripoli, supported by the ruler of Aleppo, had been successful.⁷ Both Levon and Raymond-Ruben were frustrated.

In the meantime, the Armenian King married Sybille, the daughter of Amaury II, the Lusignan King of Cyprus, in order, according to Kirakos of Gandzak, to secure "support".⁸ Levon had by her a daughter, Zabel, born, according to Rudt-Collenberg, either in 1212 or 1213.⁹ Zabel's Lusignan mother is described by her contemporary Sembat as "prudent, modest and pious".¹⁰

Apparently pleased with her daughter, Levon now turned his thoughts away from Antioch and Raymond-Ruben to his own off-spring, Zabel, as his successor. He was reinforced in his view by his nobles who asked him to undo their oath to Raymond-Ruben and promised him an oath that they would serve her as if she were his son. So, he nominated her as his heiress, according to Alishan and Jean Dardel, by following the European laws of Antioch, then prevalent in Cilician Armenia.¹¹

Zabel was only 6 or 7 years old when Levon died. Just before his death he expressed the wish that she should marry the son of the Hungarian King. He also nominated as Regent Adam of Baghras.¹²

With Levon's death began the struggle for the succession. Zabel was the king's younger daughter and still a minor. John of Brienne, husband of Levon's eldest daughter Rita, now coveted the throne on behalf of his son. However, both Rita and the infant boy soon died one after the other. The other pretender, Raymond-Ruben, who had failed in Antioch, now entered Tarsus in Cilicia with the help of some Frankish troops and Armenian barons and claimed the throne. But he was defeated by the new Regent Constantine and died in prison. Constantine of the Hetumites, whose ancestors had come from Artzakh (Karabagh) in 1073, had replaced Adam, as Regent, after the latter's assassination.¹³

Thus the pretenders were eliminated and there remained Zabel and her great problem of marriage.

The son of the Hungarian King did not turn up. Constantine, the Catholicos and the Armenian nobles, then turned for a husband to Zabel, to Antioch, which needed to be placated for the death of Raymond-Ruben.¹⁴ They chose Philip, the fourth son of Bohemond IV, the Duke of Tripoli and Prince of Antioch, on condition that he would be loyal to the Armenian Church and national traditions. Soon, however, Philip began to despise the Armenians and

carried Armenian treasures off to Antioch. This the country could not bear. One night, when the young couple were on their way to Antioch, the Regent and his troops seized Philip at Tell-Hamdoun and imprisoned him. Philip's father did not return the Armenian treasures, and Philip, therefore, was not freed, and died in prison. According to Sembat, peace then came to Cilicia.¹⁵

But not to Zabel. It seems that she had loved Philip and was grieved that he had been seized and thrown into prison to die. And now Constantine, the Armenian princes and the Catholicos decided that Hetum, the Regent's son, who was a most intelligent and handsome young man, should become King by being married to Zabel. The wedding coronation ceremonies took place in Tarsus in 1226.¹⁶

Zabel, however, heartbroken and at variance with the King and all the Armenians, and moved by a devilish anger according to Sembat, Hetum's brother, escaped to the fortress of Seleucia where her mother was staying with the Hospitallers. Regent Constantine went there with his troops and demanded her from the Knights, who eventually moved out of the fortress. Zabel was brought back. According to Kirakos she had resented being the wife of Hetum, "a child".¹⁷

However, once back after all these ordeals, Zabel became the model of a queen, wife and mother. True, for a few years she did not have children. Her first was born in 1237, eleven years after her marriage to Hetum. But soon she mothered 5 sons and 3 daughters.¹⁸ Herself the daughter of a great king and of a pious Lusignan mother, it seems that she unselfishly disregarded her personal likes or dislikes, and, joining through her marriage the two rival dynasties of the Rubenites and Hetumites, she saved the Cilician Armenian throne from anarchy. Henceforth, according to Sembat, the Armenian nation "kept growing to greatness from year to year", and Zabel came to appreciate her husband.¹⁹ The peaceful and quiet family life -- free from strife, intrigues and scandals -- probably was one of the reasons for the strength and prosperity of Cilician Armenia at this time.

Hetum's and Zabel's reign -- thriving period: success attributed to Hetum

However, this rather thriving period, following the death of Levon the Great, is generally described in history books as King Hetum's reign. Unjustly, Zabel has almost been ignored. It is only fair, therefore, when analysing this period, to make an effort in defining, impartially and without prejudice, the roles of the main protagonists.

As Rudt-Collenberg has rightly remarked, Zabel became queen "in her own right" and reigned for 33 years, from 1219 to 1252. Hetum was "Consort and King",²⁰ and, although the silver coins of this period have the words "Hetum King of Armenians" on the reverse side, the obverse has the images of both Zabel and the king, Zabel occupying the place of honour, the right-hand-

side of Hetum.²¹ The Royal Decree presenting the fortress of Haruniye and the neighbourhood to the Hospitallers in 1226, in return for their promise of support, bears the names of both King and Queen.²²

Certainly, Philip and Hetum became king only through their marriage to Zabel.

During the period under consideration, when Cilician Armenia was comparatively free from external dangers, economic and cultural life prospered in the country, and historians have almost unanimously extolled Hetum. Thirteenth century historiographers have described him as being not only devout and Christ-loving, but also as "gentle and prudent and learned in Scriptures" a "philosophical" king who with his "deep wisdom" kept the country in peace like a tranquil island amid storms.²³

This view of him as an able ruler has rightly persisted among modern historians too. Grousset has described him as "clever", "wise" and "clear-headed" and as not only one of the greatest kings in Armenian history but also as "one of the most powerful political geniuses of the Middle Ages,"²⁴ who strove to balance the threat of Moslem Mamluks by friendship with the Mongols. Dedyan has spoken of the "largeness of his view",²⁵ Mutafian of his "political sense"²⁶ and David Marshall Lang of his "great adroitness in face of overwhelming odds".²⁷

On his accession in 1226, the hold of the Crusaders on the Levant was getting weaker. Cilician Armenia had to face the enmity of the Seljuk sultans of Iconium and the Ayyubites and Mamluks of Egypt, and the entire situation was complicated by the influx of Mongol hordes from Central Asia.

Hetum, therefore, had to practise a very delicate diplomacy.

Thus, at the beginning, Cilician Armenia had to propitiate her neighbours, the Seljuks of Iconium. Hetum found it necessary to strike bilingual coins jointly in his own name and that of the Sultans Kai-Qobad I and Kai-Khusraw II to show his goodwill towards and peace with his neighbours and also for commercial purposes.²⁸ On the other hand, he cultivated matrimonial alliances with the Frankish princes. In 1237, his sister Stephanie was married to Henry I, the Lusignan King of Cyprus and, in 1254, his daughter Sybille married Bohemond VI of Antioch.²⁹ And when the Mongols crushed the armies of the Seljuk Kai-Khusraw II in 1243, Hetum was quick to realize that they were now the rising power and that only an alliance with them could save his kingdom. In 1247 he sent his brother Constable Sembat to Karakorum and, in 1254, after Zabel's death, he personally visited the Mongol court. Both were received with honour. He also supplied Armenian contingents for the Mongolian expedition to Syria and cooperated in the economic blockade of Egypt by withholding exports of Cilician timber. In return, Hetum had the promise of Mongol assistance in the protection of his kingdom. He also had larger aims in mind. He believed that only with Mongol help could the Christian states of the Levant offer adequate resistance to the Moslems, ultimately defeat them and even recover the Holy

Land. He therefore tried to win the Latin princes over to the idea of collaboration with the Mongols, but he could convince only his son-in-law, Bohemond VI of Antioch.³⁰ The Franks of Asia remained aloof and the aggressive actions of the Christians of Sidon and Acre would shatter the possible Mongol-Christian alliance against the Mamluks.³¹

For the time being, this balancing diplomacy followed by Hetum and his advisers certainly paid dividends.³² Cilician Armenia, under conditions of comparative peace and political stability, achieved remarkable prosperity and became a centre of trade both for inland caravans and on the Eastern Mediterranean. Lajazzo or Ayas and Korykos became thriving ports.³³ Prosperity and power were accompanied by a flowering of culture and arts. It was during this time and immediately after Zabel's death that Cilician Armenian artists created illuminated manuscripts which reached a standard equal to the greatest. Among these artists were the pioneer Kirakos and his disciple, the immortal Toros Roslin, who has been justifiably hailed as "a precursor of the Italian Renaissance".³⁴

Many Cilician manuscripts were commissioned by members of the royal family and, in this respect, the marriage of Zabel with Hetum was opportune, because the Hetumites were more cultured than the Rubenites. Both the King and the Queen actively supported scribes, illuminators and painters, following the example of Catholicos Constantine I, the great patron of manuscript illuminators at Hromgla.³⁵

Certainly, the pillar of the country's political stability and of the centralised government, which brought this economic and cultural prosperity, was Hetum himself, and he was greatly supported by the loyalty of his brothers, and that of Constantine, his powerful father "endowed with all wisdom," and of the virtuous and famous Catholicos, Constantine I, who was respected even by Moslems.³⁶

The important role of Zabel

But the important role discreetly played by Zabel should not be underestimated. By bringing together the pieces of information given about her by her contemporaries, one gets the picture of a graceful lady, who, as queen, wife and mother, acted as an invisible cement unifying her people, and who equally invisibly helped Hetum in every respect, even in political matters.

Thirteenth-century historiographers have universally acclaimed her as a "most pious," "benevolent and merciful and charitable" woman who always prayed and fasted; a "humane and Christ-loving" person who was "adorned with every kind of virtue."³⁷ But these writers have also stressed that she was "of a sound judgement", "prudent", "sensible and of mature intelligence since childhood" who gave "direction" to the people.³⁸

A remarkable line in Kirakos says that, when Hetum was to visit the

Mongolian court, he left his sons Levon and Toros as "his vicegerents" "since his pious Queen Zabel had departed unto Christ."³⁹ This is a clear indication that she would act as his deputy before her death and that her advice was duly taken into consideration even in political matters.

But her foremost consideration was the care of the spiritual and moral wellbeing of her people. The Cathedral and the Church of St. Mariane in Sis were built through her efforts. She was also instrumental in building a hospital in 1241, where very often she personally nursed the sick.⁴⁰

Zabel was actively interested in culture. She was not only a serious reader, as evidenced by historian Vardan's reference that she should keep his *Analysis*, but also a patron of writers. Vahram, her son's secretary, is specific about Zabel's "charity and generous gifts to scholars," to himself and to more eminent writers.⁴¹

"Impeccable" and "all-praised,"⁴² Queen Zabel by her character, conduct and activities, greatly contributed to the inner strength of Cilician Armenia. Her son, the future King Levon, himself a cultured person and described as a "bibliophile", recommended that his father should be remembered with his descendants, but, full of affection for his mother, he wanted "particularly [her] to be remembered."⁴³

Perhaps her greatest contribution was her living example of concern for the suffering and welfare of her people and devotion to her country. Despite all the tribulations she went through during her own accession and marriage, she made sure of the orderly and smooth succession to the throne. One thirteenth-century scribe has aptly summed up her part as that of a "true heiress" of Cilician Armenia who "took care of our country, also our churches, and monasteries. And on top of all the good things she did, she furthermore gave heirs to our land of Armenia, so that we did not move about unprotected or as wanderers."⁴⁴

This our history should not disregard.

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ԳՈԿՏ. ԱԳԱՊԻ ՆԱՍԻՊԵԱՆ

Հայոց պատմութեան մէջ Կիլիկիոյ Զապէլ թագուհին եղաւ այն շատ քիչերէն, որոնք ո՛չ միայն եղան լաւագոյններէն իրենց դասին՝ այլ մանաւանդ անոնցմէ որոնք մնալով հանդերձ ստուերի մէջ եւ սքողուած՝ շնչտ ու նկարագիր տուին իրենց ժամանակաշրջանին: Արդարեւ՝ Զապէլ թագուհիի ժամանակաշրջանը կը յատկանշուի քաղաքական ու տնտեսական, մշակութային ու գեղարուեստական, եւ շինարարական ու գրական արտայայտչականութեամբ մը, որուն հազիւ թէ կարելի է հանդիպիլ Կիլիկեան Հայաստանի որեւէ այլ ժամանակահատուածի մէջ:

Բարդ իրադրութիւններու մէջ էր, որ գահ բարձրացաւ Զապէլ, երբ մանկութենէ պատանութիւն հազիւ թէ քայլ առնելու վրայ էր անկա եւ միակ ուղիղ եւ օրինական ժառանգորդը կիլիկեան գահին: Ծնած էր 1212-ին կամ 1213-ին՝ ըստ Բուտ-Քոլենպերկի, եւ գահին թեկնածու մը եւ տէր մը ապահովելու մտահոգութեամբ՝ ան ամուսնացաւ կիլիկեան գահի խնամակալ Կոստանդինի որդի Հեթումի հետ 1226-ին: Իր ամուսնութենէն տասնմէկ տարի ետք էր որ ծընունդ տուաւ իր առջիննկին, որուն յաջորդեցին չորս մանչ եւ երեք աղջիկներ եւս: Արդէն իր առջիննկովն իսկ ապահովուած էր յաջորդականութիւնը գահին: Սակայն Զապէլն եղաւ ո՛չ միայն սքանչելի մայր եւ առաքինի կին՝ այլ մանաւանդ խոհեմ գահակից մը Հեթումին, որուն առած քաղաքական իրաքանչիւր քայլի ետին անսպայման գտնուեցաւ ինք ու եղաւ մղիչ ու բարոյական այն ուժը որ առաջնորդեց իր ամուսինը հաւասարակշիռ ընթացիկի մը վրայէն: Այսպէ՛ս էր որ կիլիկեան Թագաւորութիւնն եղաւ առաջինը մոնկոլական ուժին ձեռք տուող եւ անոր հետ զինուորական ու տնտեսական դաշնագիր ստորագրող:

Բարեւէր եւ զոհողութեան ներկայացուցիչ այս կինը գիտցաւ երթալ իր ժողովուրդին եւ անոր համար հաստատեց որբանոցներ, հիւանդանոցներ, այրիանոցներ, եկեղեցիներ ու կրթական հաստատութիւններ: Ի՛նքն էր որ թիկունք ու պաշտպան կանգնեցաւ կիլիկեան

գրիչներուն, մանրանկարիչներուն, պատմիչներուն եւ գեղարուեստի մշակներուն: Իր շրջանէն այժմ կան բազմաթիւ եկեղեցիներու եւ վանքերու կողքին՝ բերդեր ու կամուրջներ, պալատներ եւ ազգային ու ընկերային բազմաթիւ համալիրներ եւ հաստատութիւններ, որոնցմէ եւ ո՛չ մէկուն ճակատին արձանագրուած կարելի է գտնել անունը հայոց թագուհիին: Իսկ ժամանակակից պատմիչներն ալ, ըստ տիրող սովորութեան, կը խօսին լո՛ւկ թագաւորներու եւ իշխաններու մասին: Այսուհանդերձ՝ վեր հանելու համար իսկական դէմքը Կիլիկիոյ Ջապէլ թագուհիին՝ յօդուածագիրը լաւագոյնս կ'օգտագործէ սուղ տընայլները Սմբատ Սպարապետին եւ Կիրակոս Գանձակեցիին, Վարդան Բարձրբերդցիին եւ Սամուէլ Անեցիին, Վահրամ Բարունիին եւ Գրիգոր Ականցիին, Միքայէլ Ասորիին եւ ձեռագրական յիշատակարաններուն՝ ի վերջոյ եզրակացնելու համար թէ «իր նկարագիրով, վարք ու բարքով եւ գործունէութեամբ՝ Ջապէլ թագուհին մեծապէս սատարեց Կիլիկեան Հայաստանի ներքին ամրապնդումին: ... Թերեւըս իր մեծագոյն նպաստն էին շահագրգռուածութեան իր կենդանի օրինակը իր ժողովուրդին տառապանքին եւ հանգիստին, եւ իր նուիրումը իր երկրին հանդէպ: Հակառակ այն բոլոր տուայտանքներուն որոնցմէ անցաւ իր գահակալութեան եւ ամուսնութեան առիթով՝ անհիկա ապահովեց գահին վստահ եւ հեզասահ յաջորդականութիւն մը»: Ապա Դոկտ. Նասիպեան կը կրկնէ Հայոց թագուհիին ժամանակակիցի մը խօսքերը թէ անհիկա եղաւ ո՛չ միայն «իսկական ժառանգորդ մը» Կիլիկիոյ Գահին, որ «հոգ տարաւ իր երկրին, ինչպէս նաեւ մեր եկեղեցիներուն եւ վանքերուն, [այլ] իր կատարած բոլոր բարիքներէն վեր [եւ] արեւին ըլլալով՝ գահաժառանգներ պարգեւեց մեր Հայաստան Աշխարհին, որպէսզի անպաշտպան կերպով կամ որպէս թափառաշրջիկներ շշարժէինք աջ ու ահեակ»: