

# HISTORY

## QUEEN MELISENDE AND HER THREE SISTERS

By Jirair Tutunjian

**L**iving Richard the Lionheart, thanks to Sir Walter Scott's novels and Hollywood movies, is arguably the most famous personality of the Crusaders. If one were to look for his female counterpart, there's no doubt that Queen Melisende of Jerusalem, whose mother was Armenian, must be considered the luminous and commanding female figure of the Crusader royalty.

Melisende was born in Edessa/Urfa in 1105--six years after the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem. Her mother was Princess Morphia, daughter of Prince Gabriel of Melitene/Malatya. Her father was Baldwin de Bourg, Count of Edessa. Melisende, the eldest of four girls, spent the first ten years of her life in Edessa and had an Armenian education. When her father was picked king of Jerusalem to become Baldwin II, the family moved to Jerusalem. When she was in her late teens, her mother died and Melisende became a surrogate mother to her three young siblings—Alidz/Alice, Hodeirna, and little Yveta.

Melisende's father insisted that his eldest daughter be raised as crown princess. During her father's reign her title was "the king's daughter and heir to the kingdom." When she was in her early 20s, her father picked Count Fulk V of Anjou as her husband. The count was twice her age and was notable for his coarseness. He also had a married son. While Melisende was tall and beautiful, Fulk was short and eminently ugly. Realizing that the arranged marriage was for dynastic reasons (Fulk was a powerful ally of Louis VI, King of France), Melisende obeyed her father's wishes. There wasn't much love in the marriage. Soon after King Baldwin died and Melisende and Fulk began to share the crown of Jerusalem as co-rulers, Fulk began to undermine her position and placed his imported Frank friends in court, dismissing the established staff which was loyal to Melisende.

Fulk also encouraged the rumor that Melisende had an adulterous relationship with Count Hugh II of Le Puiset, Count of Jaffa and her childhood friend. When an attempt was made on the count's life, Melisende suspected her husband was behind the plot. Church leaders and most of the nobles sided with her. Fulk lost his nerve and began to cede power back to Melisende. After he died (1143) in a hunting accident, Melisende

ruled as queen and regent to her young son Baldwin III. As a deft diplomat, she prevented wars with the Saracens. To strengthen her family's rule over the Mediterranean's eastern littoral, she helped her sisters—Alidz and Hodeirna--marry the Prince of Antioch and Count of Tripoli respectively. And whenever her sisters had domestic problems, Melisende became a marriage counselor.



Queen Melisende

Contemporary chronicler William of Tyre wrote that Melisende was "beautiful, wise, sweet and compassionate." Others report that tenderness was not her way. She was brisk in manner and didn't suffer fools gladly. She had large, dark Armenian eyes, "smoke-dark eyelashes and strong dark brows." She was fond of riding in the sun.

Through her intercession, the Holy Sepulcher was reconstructed and altered. The cathedral's general lines have survived to the present. She also founded the vast St. Lazarus Bethany Abbey, a few miles southeast of Jerusalem, and through land endowments made it the wealthiest abbey in the Holy Land. She then appointed (1144) her youngest sister, Yveta, who was a nun, abbess there. She built an Armenian church over the tomb of Virgin Mary and endowed lands around it which now belong to the St. James' Armenian Patriarchate. Queen Melisende built the St. Anne Church in Jerusalem, one of the best preserved examples of Crusader architecture, over the traditional birthplace of Virgin Mary. To help pilgrims get their first sight of Jerusalem from a distance, she built an edifice west of the Holy City. She also helped enlarge Armenian Church lands southwest of the city which later became known as the Armenian Quarter.

Concerned in town planning and urban development, she built three adjoining bazaars which are still in use in the Old City of Jerusalem. A patron of the arts, she established a scriptorium where monks could produce illuminated manuscripts and books. Armenian monks at the scriptorium compiled her richly-decorated and ivory-covered prayer book which became famous as Melisende's Psalter. The pagination of book was in Armenian.

Because she enjoyed power, she didn't relinquish the throne to her teenage son, Baldwin III. She maintained that the boy was callow and acted too young for his





age. Baldwin finally rebelled against his mother and eventually won the contest. Queen Melisende retired in Nablus, north of Jerusalem, but she soon reconciled with her son and was back in power working with her son. She died in 1161 at the age of 56. Her three sisters nursed her in her last days. She was buried in the Church

of the Tomb of St. Mary, under the altar dedicated to Sourp Hovagim and Sourp Anna. To the end she remained an exceptional steward of the kingdom, according to contemporary chroniclers.

During her life and for centuries troubadours sang about her beauty and her supposed love affair with Count Hugh Le Puiset. In the 19th century Heine, Swinburne, and Cartucci revitalized interest in Melisende by writing about her life and beauty. The most famous work dedicated to her was Edmond Rostand's "Faraway Princess".

### Princess Alidz/Alice

Melisende used her position to arrange dynastic marriages for her two sister—Alidz and Hodeirna. Alidz, pretty, headstrong and haughty, married Prince Bohemond II of Antioch in 1126, but like Melisende, Alidz had a rocky marriage. When her husband was killed—by the Saracens—while on his way to grab Armenian lands in Cilicia, the 20-year-old Alidz unilaterally declared that she was the sole rule: she didn't consult the patriarch, the nobles or her father, Baldwin II of Jerusalem, the most senior Crusader ruler.

To hold on to power she sent a message to the Saracen Atabeg Zengi, governor of Aleppo and Mosul, and propositioned an alliance. Meanwhile her father, along with Melisende's husband, marched to Antioch. After a brief siege, Princess Alidz was forced to surrender. Baldwin II forgave her daughter and sent her to retirement in Latakia. He then appointed Count Joscelin of Edessa, who was half Armenian, as regent. Several years later, when Joscelin died, Alidz once again tried to take over as the ruler of Antioch. Through trickery—mainly by the Patriarch of Antioch—her 8-year-old daughter, Constance, was secretly "married" to a 36-year-old Crusader adventurer. Constance and her

husband became the new rulers. Alidz, who was barely 30, retired again, but this time permanently.

### Countess Hodeirna

Hodeirna, Melisende's second sister, was plump and silver-haired. Like Alidz she was pretty, headstrong and impetuous. And like Melisende and Alidz, she had domestic problems from day one. Her husband (Count Raymond of Tripoli) suspecting her of adultery, kept her indoors. After prolonged quarrels, they reconciled through Melisende's mediation. When Melisende had a stroke, Hodeirna rushed to Jerusalem and together with Yveta took care of the queen.

### Abbess Yveta

The youngest of the four sisters, Yveta, started life on a tragic and bizarre note. When she was five, her father (Baldwin II) went north to Syria to free an ally who had been captured by Turkish chieftain Timurtash. Instead, he too was captured. Queen Morphia hired Armenians to find the secret location where her husband was being held prisoner. When the Armenian scouts told her that the king was being held in Kharput/Kharpert, she entered into negotiations with Timurtash. To guarantee that Baldwin would pay the 60,000 Dinar ransom, little Yveta was handed as hostage to the Saracens. Thanks to the Armenians of Edessa, the money was raised and Yveta was released after being held hostage for nine months. One historian wrote: "She had gone away as a lively and often frivolous child, but came back silent and withdrawn and conspicuously devoted to prayer." At the appropriate age (1134), she became a nun. Melisende appointed her abbess of the St. Lazarus Convent and nunnery in Bethany. She remained there till her death.

Yveta's three sisters might have quarreled with their husbands but they never quarreled among themselves. They were women with power in an age when women had few rights. They were also half-Armenian and didn't look like Franks. The four daughters of Queen Morphia knew about the racial prejudice of the Frankish Crusaders. The three older ones were raised in the Armenian city of Edessa and had relatives and friends in that city. They also accompanied their mother to the Armenian church. Given the frequent absences of their father, their Armenian mother's influence on their education must have been paramount, especially since Armenian was their mother tongue. As well, like most Crusader ladies, they were surrounded by Armenian nurses and maids and a whole household of Middle Eastern natives.

According to some historians a great deal of their dis-

agreements with their husbands and resentments were rooted in their hostility to the foreigner Franks. They also knew how their father had mistreated, looted, and overtaxed the Armenians of Edessa. He had imprisoned Armenian nobles, confiscated their lands and given them to his Frankish knights. They knew that their father had tricked and threatened their Armenian grandfather (Prince Gabriel of Malatya) to extract more money than the promised dowry of Queen Morphia. Baldwin II, like his predecessor (Baldwin I) was an avaricious and cruel man. The girls certainly knew that their father's cousin and predecessor (King Baldwin I of Jerusalem) had betrayed and driven away his Armenian wife (Queen Arda, daughter of Prince Tatoul) once he had gone through her 12 million-Franc dowry.

Princesses Alidz' proposed alliance with Saracen Zengi was designed to form a military bloc which could erase Frankish presence in Antioch. She wanted to revive the Armeno-Syrian policy of thirty years back. Alidz was supported by Armenians of Antioch who considered

her as one of their own. The girls must have known that the Crusaders had been indirectly responsible for the massacre of Edessa Armenians.

While Melisende was a conscientious ruler, she and her sisters were indifferent to the welfare of the Franks in the Middle East. Their lifelong solidarity was a "sullen hostility to the world in which they lived," according to historian Zoe Oldenburg.

For three decades, starting in 1130, the Queen Melisende, Princess Alidz and Countess Hodeirna were the "newsmakers" of the Crusader world. While Armenian royalty continued its close relationship with the Frankish nobility for two more centuries, often giving their daughters in marriage to the Europeans, they never shone in the Crusader world as brightly as Queen Morphia's remarkable four daughters.

*Note: Mr. Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, is a native of Jerusalem. He has a long career in journalism and currently is the editor of Keshart.com English section.*

## Գրիգոր Նարեկացի

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Սէր ի յամպոյ ամպ սիրեցեալ  
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վայր իջուցեալ կաթս անձրեաց:



Ի սիրոյ սէր ծանուցեալ,  
սիրաբողբոջ տարփմամբ լցեալ,  
սիրով ընդ սէր միաբանեալ:

Լուսինն ի լոյս ի լոռան եկեալ,  
ճոխ ճեմելով՝ գիշերավարն  
ըզկնի ճեմել բարկ աստեղօք:

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ի նոր Սիոն զծայրսն տուեալ,  
քաղցր արեւով արուսեկին:

Գարունաբեր, գարնանաշարժ  
գեղգեղելով երփնագարդեալ,  
նոր հարսանեաց միաբանեալ:

Եկա՛յք նոր մեք զուարճացեալ,  
վառ ի վառեալ տիպ ծալ ի ծալ  
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