

Religious Situation in Durres City in the Middle Age

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Abstract:

The territory of the city of Durres had contacts with Christianity since the apostolic period. Having an important geo-strategic position, the city of Durres became an area where religious influences met each other, both from the east and the west. At the beginning of the church organization, Durres belonged to the jurisdiction of Constantinople. In the religious conflicts between east and west, since the beginning of 6th century, the bishops of Durres took the side of the east. Durres Bishopric at the time of Slavic migration experienced a serious crisis. In the years to follow, empowerment of Byzantium also meant strengthening of Durres based on the fact that it had already connected its definitive activity with Constantinople. Church strengthening in Durres at this time is clearly noted also by its extraordinary expansion of jurisdiction beyond the traditional borders covering the territory from Tivar to Vlora. In the case of splitting of Christian church in 1054 into east and west, it was not possible to maintain the totality of Metropolis of Durres because of extreme contradiction between Orthodox south and Latin north, thus causing weakening of this Bishopric. It continued weakening in relation to Catholicism but at the beginning of the fifteenth century Christianity experienced a new strike due to the fact that now the Ottoman Empire had started with its penetration toward Balkans and Catholicism found it impossible to expand to the eastern Byzantium.

Key words: Durres city, The Middle Ages, religious situation

According to historical evidence, Christianity in Albania had a consolidated structure. It was based on administrative division of Diocletian era. Metropolis and the main office of Archbishop would establish in the centre of each province. Under its jurisdiction were the subordinate (suffragan) dioceses. Durres (centre of the province of New Epirus) was one of the four main church centres, along with Shkodra (Prevali province), Justiniana Prima (Dardania) and Nikopoja (Old Epirus). Archbishop of Durres had under its jurisdiction 8 bishoprics¹. The first Albanian saints also appeared. One of them was Saint Astin (Astio) or Asterin, bishop of Durres². From fifth century and on, it was the Constantinople Patriarchate that fought to take the Albanian bishoprics under its subordination. According to the data of the year 519³, the Archbishop of Durres and many bishops of New Epirus province were on the side of the East (Constantinople). For this orientation, a great role was played by the Emperor Anastasi I (484-519), who had an impact on strengthening the connections of Durres Metropolis with Constantinople Patriarchate. In 5-6th centuries, Christianity in Durres and in the entire territory known traditionally as autochthonous Illyric experienced a period of crisis. This occurred as a result of migration of barbaric peoples and simultaneously of weakening of the Byzantium power. In spite of that, the Christian culture was not terminated, but its main centres moved from the classical traditional locations (low lands) to the Illyrian tradition areas (high lands). Bishoprics of this era either ceased their activity, or survived establishing into remote areas, with exception for Bishopric of Durres and Bylysy, which resisted until 11th century⁴. Durres Bishopric played a particular role at the time of migrations for uniting autochthonous Illyrian people for Christianity. This would

¹ Histori e Popullit Shqiptar, vëll. I, Tiranë: Toena, 2002, f. 201

² Thëngjilli, Petrika, Shqiptarët midis lindjes dhe perëndimit 1506-1839, Fusha fetare I, Tiranë, 2002, f. 13

³ Histori e Popullit Shqiptar, vëll. I, Tiranë: Toena, 2002, f. 202

⁴ Frashëri, Kristo, Indetiteti Kombëtar Shqiptar dhe Çështje të tjera, Tiranë: Edisud, 2006, f. 58-59

influence more than the polytheist religion for their unification against barbarian Slavs, who were still in the pagan era. In the years that followed the death of Justinian, Diocese of New Epirus with centre in Durres, broke the dependence from Rome to get connected with Constantinople. At the end of the 6th century there was lack of correspondence of the Pope Gregory the Great with bishops of New Epirus, while according to the correspondence, contacts continued regularly with other provinces of Illyricum. This indicates for the discontinued connections of Rome with Durres⁵. From the first half of the 8th century the year 732, Byzantine Emperor Leo II, Izauri, decreed the secession of dioceses of Albanian territories from Rome and their entry under the jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate⁶. This act commenced the process of subordination of bishoprics from Rome to Byzantium. But generally, during the centuries 8-9, the mentioned decree remained in paper. In the Constantinople Synod of the year 879, the Metropolitan of Durres, Lukian, signed the act confirming the schism of the year 863 between Rome and Constantinople⁷. Detachment from the jurisdiction of Rome and uniting with Constantinople, not only of Durres, but of the entire Illyricum was sanctioned by iconoclast wars⁸. Strengthening of Constantinople Patriarchate to the detriment of the Church of Rome, which went parallel to strengthening of the Byzantine Empire brought with it the empowerment of the position of the church of Durres within the Albanian dioceses. This is also expressed by extraordinary expansion of its jurisdiction beyond traditional boundaries. In *Notitiae* of Leo VI (901-907), at the time of Patriarch Nikola Mistik, Metropolitan of Durres had under its jurisdiction the bishoprics of Stefanica, Kunavia, Kruja, Elison-Lezha, Dioclea, Shkodra, Drisht, Pult,

⁵ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Krishtërimi roman në shqipëri në shek. VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër, 2000, f. 91

⁶ Shuftaj, Milan, Serbët dhe shqiptarët, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 184

⁷ Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia volumen I-II, Vindobonae MCMXVIII. dok. 57.

⁸ Acta Albanie, I, dok. 52, 53

Glavinica, Aulona, Lyknid, Tivar, Cërnik, Pulkeropolis, Gradec⁹. The same situation is confirmed by *Notitiae* of Jan Cimish (969 - 976), according to which the Metropolitan of Durres was expanding from Tivar to Vlora, with 15 archbishop centres: Tivar, Lyknid, Shkodra, Drisht, Dioclea, Pult, Lezha, Kruja, Stefanica, Kunavi, Cërrik¹⁰. However, Christianity generally maintained its Latin content. The 10th century is considered as the end of the period of joint Christianity. That was the time of official separation of Christianity, the definitive schism of the year 1054¹¹, into catholic western church with centre in Rome and the orthodox church of east based in Constantinople. The Albanian territories were divided between these two big centres of Christianity.

From this century, the Archbishopric of Ohrid was established, subordinates of which were the bishoprics of Southern and South-eastern Arberia. Others were under the Metropolis of Durres¹². During the 10th century and in the first half of 11th century Durres was an important religious centre for Albanian territories. It had an Archbishopric under which were 15 bishoprics¹³: Tivar, Licin (Ulqin), Shkodra, Drisht, Dioclea (Genta), Pult, Elison (Lezha), Kruja, Stefanica, Kunavia, Cërrik¹⁴. In 11th century, there were several church dioceses in Albanian territories, such as Shkodra, Lezha, Kruja, Vlora and Durres. After the new administrative and political organization, the province of Prevalitana took the authority of the Metropolis under the control of which were all churches of Tivar, Dokleja, Berat to Vlora and Gllavanica, while in the 10th century Durres had one Archbishopric which covered 15 bishoprics. District of Durres Metropolis, because of the

⁹ LE QUEIN, *Orients*, Christianus, Völl. II f. 241

¹⁰ J. DARRAUZES, *Notitia e Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, Paris, 1981, f. 330

¹¹ Pëllumb Xhufi, *Krishterimi Roman në Shqipëri, shek, VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër, 2000, f.92.*

¹² Fjalori Enciklopedik Shqiptar, vëll. II, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2008, f. 1352

¹³ Milan Shufaj, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 186*

¹⁴ Pëllumb Xhufi, *Krishterimi Roman në Shqipëri, shek, VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër, 2000, f. 91-92.*

confessional duality was a point of collision of conflicts between east and west. In the case of splitting of Christian church in 1054 in east and west, it was not possible to maintain the totality of Metropolis of Durres because of extreme contradiction between Orthodox south and Latin north. The city of Durres itself, on the religious aspect was composed of two confessions. Until the Venetian rule, this city retained the Orthodox rite, but Latin residents were always on the side of the authority of the pope. As it may be seen, the jurisdiction of Metropolis of Durres was extended to the northern territory, which was once a territory of the province of Prevali. This extension of religious jurisdiction of Durres had its influence on the extent of political and administrative jurisdiction on the theme of Durres, XI century. A particularity of Durres is that since XI century and on was a stronghold in the area of demarcation between Catholicism and orthodox Christianity. The demarcation line started at the port city of Durres, it continued through Egnatia route and went on to Ohrid and Skopje. In the important religious centre of Durres, often the catholic and orthodox archbishops alternated each other. For extension of Catholicism or orthodoxy in Durres and its surroundings, a great impact was seen by different invasions. In cases when they came from east, north or northeast, they impacted on expansion of orthodoxy. While in cases when such invasions came from west, they influenced on expansion of Catholicism.

Christianity in Durres, after the breach between Rome and Constantinople went through moments of crisis. Located between catholic north and orthodox south, Metropolis of Durres could not preserve the unifying character of the Christian community. At the population of the city of Durres after the year 732, orthodox belief was constantly gaining more territory. Until such time as Durres fell under Venetian rule, it was dominated by Greek bishops, priests, monasteries and

churches¹⁵. In times when Durres was under Byzantine rule, it was the catholic metropolis that was in crisis and vice versa, when Durres was under the rule of the Westerners (Normans, Anjous, Venetians), the orthodox metropolis was in crisis. The Archbishoprics of Durres was under pressure of Ohrid autocephalous orthodox metropolis, whose archbishop in tenth century was called "Archbishop of entire Bulgaria" and "was trying to expand its authority over all the dioceses and archbishopric of Durres". In 1020, Berat and Vlora remained outside the impact of Durres¹⁶. In addition to pressure coming from Metropolis of Ohrid, the Orthodox Church of Durres was under pressure, at this time, by the Catholic Church. With the insistence of the Pope Benedict VIII, in 1022¹⁷, Durres lost jurisdiction over its bishoprics of Tivar and Ulqin, which were placed under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Ragusa. The purpose of popes was in the framework of the fierce rivalry with Byzantium, to strengthen through unification of all Latins. Rivalry for Metropolis of Durres in these times was tripled, because it took place between Latins, Byzantium and Slavs. Rivalry of Latin, Byzantine and Slavic churches to win over the space of Metropolis of Durres continued for a period of about 200 years¹⁸. During this time, it is noticed at the Christians of Durres and its surroundings the phenomenon of transition from the orthodox to the catholic confession, the case of consecration of the Catholic Church of Saint Tryphon in Kotor on 19 June 1166, and the participation of Bishop Lazarus of Arberia (Lazaro Albanensi)¹⁹. It was a sign of preliminary preferences that Lazar had to Catholic rite. His transition is also shown in the document dated 29 December 1167, where the envoys of the Pope visited the Albanian bishop of Kruja, Lazar, from whom they were informed that he wanted to leave the Greek

¹⁵ Shuflaj, Milan, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 186

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 186-187

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 187

¹⁸ Milan Shuflaj, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 188

¹⁹ *Acta et diplomata*, I, f.93.

(orthodox) rite²⁰. The Bishopric of Kruja (an integral part of the Metropolis of Durres), through a pope decree from this moment on, passed under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Ragusa. The fact that in this catholic ceremony, present was the leader of Arberia, Andrea (Prior Arbanesis) shows that local secular authority was joining the church authority in this spiritual shift from East to West²¹.

The crucial moment was the year 1208, when Prince of Arbër, Dimitër, addressed the pope Innocent III, to accept him and his people within the Church of Rome²². In the context of rivalry between the two churches, catholic and orthodox, often the attention of the clergy of the two churches was concentrated in Durres, as the most important city on the shores of the Adriatic coast. In 1168²³, papal representatives, according to historical evidence, often visited Durres. It was the time when Constantinople was preparing for the final division of churches. In this period, an important role was played by the clergy from Durres. Gjon Durrsaku, in 1197 was sent by Pope Innocent III to the Byzantine courtyard with a very difficult mission, that of unification of churches²⁴. Durres and its surroundings, which were forming the province of Durres and Arber, in the second half of the 12th century prove for the presence of the Catholic Church²⁵. With a similar mission was also the high Albanian prelate, Nikolle Durrsaku (Nicolaus de Dyrrachio). Pope Innocent IV discovered at Nikolle Durrsaku the rare qualities and attracted him in the courtyard, appointing him as a clergyman in the Apostolic Room. This clergyman remained the closest man to Pope, especially in the relations of the papacy with the east church. This acknowledgment that Papacy had to

²⁰ I bidem, f.97.

²¹ PëllumbXhufi, Krishterimi Roman në Shqipëri, shek, VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër, 2000, f.93.

²² Ibidem, f. 94.

²³ Shuflaj, Milan, Serbët dhe shqiptarët, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f.190.

²⁴ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Nikollë Durrsaku dhe përpjekjet për ribashkimin e kishave në mesin e shekullit XIII, S. Historike, 1-4, Tiranë 1998, f. 5.

²⁵ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Nikollë Durrsaku dhe përpjekjet për ribashkimin e kishave në mesin e shekullit XIII, S. Historike, 1-4, Tiranë 1998, f .5-6.

this Durres clergyman derived from his knowledge. He spoke Latin and Byzantium Greek well, as well as knew well the catholic and orthodox Byzantine dogma²⁶. According to historical data, in 1254, the emperor Theodore Laskaris asked Nikolle Durrsaku to present the catholic version for issues that were subject of heated debate between the Church of Rome and that of Constantinople. Two years later (1256), Nikolla prepared a treaty, which later would constitute the theoretical basis for negotiations on the union²⁷. His mission was a primary role in the extended dialog, for the problems between the papacy and the Byzantine Empire in the field of theology and in the diplomatic aspect, which was concluded with the Council of Lyon in 1274²⁸. According to evidence in the beginning of 13th century, the catholic clergyman of Durres had a special role in the processing of heads of Arbëri to orientate them to the side of the catholic rite²⁹. This shows that besides Tivar, Durres was also the centre of dissemination of catholic belief. Changes brought by the Fourth Crusades with the Venetian rule (1204 - 1210) and later with the Anjous (1272 - 1371) in Durres, created objective conditions to strengthen the bases of Catholicism in the territory of Arbëri³⁰. In this period, the church of Durres had a special relationship with the papacy. This is evidenced by a letter of Pope Innocent IV of 24 March 1255, stating that the leader of the church of Durres was appointed directly by the Pope (*ad collationem Romani Pontificispertinentem*)³¹. During the 13th century the rivalry deteriorated to the Catholics of northern coast of the east Adriatic, for spatial church domination between Ragusa and Tivar. This war was accompanied with somehow the loss of

²⁶ Flalori Enciklopedik Shqiptar, vol.I, Tiranë 2008, f. 557.

²⁷ Ibidem

²⁸ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Nikollë Durrsaku dhe përpjekjet për ribashkimin e kishave në mesin e shekullit XIII, S. Historike, 1-4, Tiranë 1998, f. 5.

²⁹ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Krishtërimi roman në shqipëri në shek. VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër, 2000, f. 94

³⁰ A. Ducellier, Le façade, f. 208, 211, 298

³¹ Xhufi, Pëllumb, Nikollë Durrsaku dhe përpjekjet për ribashkimin e kishave në mesin e shekullit XIII, S. Historike, 1-4, Tiranë 1998, f. 7.

catholic authority over Metropolis of Durres. This was also affected by the creation of Serb Autocephalous Church in 1219. At the time of Pope Innocent IV, Arbëria, particularly Durres became the centre of activity against orthodoxy in the Balkans, while Tivar became the main support against the expansion of the Serbian church to the detriment of Catholicism. This goal was best served by the appointment by Pope Innocent IV of the Archbishop of Tivar, Gjoni de Plano Carpini in 1248³².

In an overall picture, in Metropolis of Durres during the 13-14th century, the increase or reduction of Catholicism or orthodoxy occurred in direct correlation to the political changes. Changes that occurred in the secular political hierarchy were accompanied by changes in the religious hierarchy as well. Despite this phenomenon, the long war between the papacy and Byzantium for Durres and all the Albanian lands never took the fanatic form. Religious fanaticism did not serve as an obstacle. On the contrary, available evidence shows a pure symbiosis between Catholicism and orthodoxy. Until 1272, when the Anjou reign was established in Durres, there was a distinction in terms of Catholicism or orthodoxy between the coastline of Adriatic sea that was mainly dominated by great noble Albanian Catholics and the inner part that was mainly dominated by Byzantine rule. In general the political rule influenced significantly the religious affiliations. Serbian rule of Stefan Dusan (1345-1355) created the favourable situation for the revival of orthodoxy³³. After the establishment of Byzantine rule, there is found evidence that shows for the growth of the catholic noblemen. This is explained by the comprehensive combat of Westerners for Catholicism in Arberia territory, rebuilding the disconnected range of bishoprics, mostly along the Adriatic and Ionian coastline. During this intensive process that lasted until 1370, the catholic authority that was fragile in many provinces was restored, and many orthodox provinces became catholic. Dominican order clergy were established in

³² Shuflaj Milan, *Serbët dhe hqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 192-193

³³ *Acta Albaniae*, I, Dok.552, 554, 555.

most of the catholic dioceses. Guascon was heading the diocese of Durres in the period 1310-1318.³⁴ These times of flourishing of Catholicism are witnessed through some papal decrees of the year 1319³⁵, some of them headed by Albanian prince families, in the case of the great insurgency against Serbs. Topia family as well that had connection with Anjou dynasty in 1392 was catholic (princes catolicus). The bordering line between catholic and orthodox belief was stretched in the central Arberia, presence of which is witnessed by church organization in Durres, where an orthodox metropolis and a catholic archbishop had their main offices³⁶.

In the second half of the 14th century, a catholic archbishop appeared and the orthodox Christianity began to withdraw gradually from the almost destroyed city³⁷. The standing of the princes of Arbanon between the orthodox and catholic churches, a feature characterizing Topias, Balshaj and their successors in the 14th century³⁸, had the source from the bordering area of central Arbëria between the catholic culture and the Byzantine orthodox tradition and culture.³⁹ The catholic clergy in Durres at the time of Anjou rule was almost entirely connected with Charles I of Anjou and later, from 1392, with the Venetians. As a result in the high hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the number of clergymen of Albanian origin grew. According to Anjou records, the Abbot Nikolla (abbas Nicolaus Albania) and the cleric of Durres, Gjon are mentioned⁴⁰. The latter was identical to the first Anjou archbishop of Durres. This intensive process of Catholicism in Durres remains one of the key factors of survival of Catholicism until the contemporary period. Arberia, especially the central part had become the pivotal area of Catholicism, whose centre

³⁴ Shuflaj, Milan, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 2002.

³⁵ Shuflaj, Milan, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 199-202.

³⁶ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë, 2007, f. 89.

³⁷ A.Ducellier, *Façade*, 552 v.

³⁸ A.Ducellier, *Façade* 554 v; sipas Oliver Jens Schmitt në: *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë, 2007, f. 89.

³⁹ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë, 2007, f. 89.

⁴⁰ Shuflaj, Milan, *Shuflaj, Milan, Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Bargjini, Tiranë 2002, f. 201.

was not exactly in Durres in the 14th century, as it was mixed in terms of belief, but was in an ethnic Arber environment in highlands with old Benedictine assemblies⁴¹. In the second half of this century, no more orthodox metropolis is evidenced⁴². Finally, reference must be made to a foreign traveller in 1308, who would call Albanians as *ne pure latini, neque pure scismatici*, which means that they are not proper Catholics and not proper orthodox⁴³. But depending on their political and economic interests, Albanians (Arber people) were on the side of Rome rather than on that of Constantinople. As the communication was much denser with the lower Italy, and its (Durres) inclusion in a catholic state, made it possible to detach Durres from the Byzantine - orthodox sphere and strengthened the Latin character of this city, which in 15th century rose into an unquestionable catholic bastion in the Arberia region.⁴⁴ Illyrian-Arber territory located between orthodox east and catholic west was an area where permanent intra-religious rivalries occurred. As a consequence of these developments, people of Arberia divided into two Christian religions, catholic and orthodox, with a slight dominance of the latter. They became protagonist of these religious events much earlier compared to their newcomer Slavic neighbours, Bulgarians or Serbs who accepted Christianity much later (9th and 10th centuries), when the Arber Christian tradition had gone a long way. Illyrian-Arber population, despite religious rivalries within Christian belief, preserved its ethnic identity. This consolidated Arber identity was preserved in the difficult post-Byzantine circumstances, when Albanians were involved in the long process of converting to Islam, and when the Albanian religious picture became the most specific among the Balkan peoples.

⁴¹ Oliver Jens Schmitt *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë, 2007, f. 89.

⁴² A. Ducellier, *Façade*, 554 v

⁴³ Pëllumb Xhufi, *Krishtërimi roman në shqipëri në shek. VI-XVI, në Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptarë, Shkodër*, 2000, f. 95; Pëllumb Xhufi, *Ndjenja fetare në Shqipëri gjatë mesjetës, S. Historike 1-4*, Tiranë 1997, f. 14.

⁴⁴ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë, 2007, f. 88.