

## Medieval Hungary's relations with the Albanian feudal families of Topia and Balshaj

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### Abstract:

*The history of Albanian relations with Hungarians represents an interesting stage of medieval Albanian contacts with a people that geographically did not meet with Albanian territories but that politically had extended its influence in Arbnor areas as well. The first Hungarian-Albanian relations were developed through the triangle Croatia-Hungary-Albania, due to the fact that Croatia, since early 12<sup>th</sup> century, had accepted the Hungarian sovereignty, while from the territorial, economic and religious perspective, Croatian territories met with North Albanian lands. In fact, after the death of the Hungarian King, Andrew III, the last of the Árpád Dynasty, the Hungarian throne was inherited by Anzhuins based on marital relations. Since 1308 Anzhuins are actual possessors of Hungary and Croatia and at the same time they were involved in medieval Albanian politics. In this context, relations between the Arbnor feudal families of Topia and Balshaj family and Hungarians appear as more specific, primarily developed through the Hungarian branch of Anzhuin dynasty.*

*Regardless of the fact that Albanian political attempts towards Hungary failed to yield direct fruits, either those of anti-Ottoman defense or preventing the Venetian competitiveness in the Adriatic, the value of these relations consists of the fact that they witness the importance of Albanian lands in the Western states policy of the time and also the active role of Albanians in these events, whom Hungarians considered as allies both of Catholic religion as well as anti-Ottoman and anti-Venetian policy.*

**Key words:** medieval Hungary, Albanian feudal families, Topia, Balshaj

The history of relations between the Albanian feudal nobility and medieval Hungarian state represents an interesting stage of medieval contacts between these two peoples that in terms of geographical aspect did not meet each other but in terms of political aspect maintained dynamic relations of political, religious and cultural nature. During Middle Ages, Hungary is presented as one of the most stable states of Europe, without any disintegration of its territories that was a general characteristic for the states of that time. Acceptance of Christianity transformed Hungary into a major force thus enabling the adoption of the system of social, political and cultural values of Western Europe<sup>1</sup>. Western Latinity featured the form and state content to this people<sup>2</sup>. In addition, establishment of Hungary as a state on the northwestern border of the Balkans would have a great political impact in the own Balkan Peninsula given the fact that Hungarians as a non-Slavic people, upon their settlement along the Danube valley made union of south and west Slavs impossible (the Czechs and Poles), thereby preventing unification of two Slavic groups into a single unit, which would certainly influence in the definitive slavization of the Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Jireček, *Istorija Srba*, Beograd, 1978, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> M. Šufflay, *Hrvati u srednjovećnom viru*, Zagreb, 1999, p. 13.

## 1. HUNGARIAN BRANCH OF ANZHUIN DYNASTY AND ARBNOR TOPIA FAMILY

Starting from the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the royal Anzhuin family became a connection point between Hungarians and Albanians, which after strengthening ties with the Southern Italy passed into Albania and in 1272 established there the Albanian Anzhuin Kingdom with its center in Durrës. To start with, armies of the French Count Charles I Anzhuin, who was a member of the French royal family, had defeated the armies of the German King Manfred Hohenstaufen of Sicily in 1266 in the battle of Benavente in Italy. On this occasion Charles I Anzhuin was crowned King of Sicily. Yet, his military and political plans did not suffice to him; his aim was to set up a new and great Latin empire. It is comprehensible that currently like before, on the occasion of Crusades the shortest route ever to the establishment of the Latin Empire, passed through Albanian territories. For this purpose, Charles attempted via political combinations to take control of the Albanian territories that had been under the Norman administration being related with Hohenstaufen Germans. Therefore, following the victory against the Germans in Italy and long-lasting discussions with Albanian feudal lords, Charles I managed to impose the Anzhuin sovereignty on the Albanian territories and proclaim the Albanian Anzhuin Kingdom on 21 February 1273<sup>3</sup>.

Installation of western-style power in an area traditionally linked with Byzantine was not supported for a long time. Over the time, Albanians' dissatisfaction against Anzhuins amounted to open conflicts. Byzantium took advantage of this situation, namely Emperor Mihajlo VIII Paleolog, who managed to attract some of the Albanian insurgents. Thus, sporadic fighting took place during the years 1274 and 1275, while in 1279 a large Anzhuin army was

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<sup>3</sup>M. Monti, *La dominazione napoletana in Albania*, Carlo I d'Angio, primo re regni albanesi në "Rivista d'Albania" 1940, p.50

deployed in Spinarica. In the spring of 1281 a battle was fought along Osum river to capture Berat. Despite the defeat, along the coastal edge at the castles of Durrës, Vlora and Kanina, the Anzhuin army did not relinquish from war plans against Byzantium.

However, while Anzhuins suffered a temporary defeat in Arbëri, almost at the same time they were successful in becoming heirs to one of the most powerful medieval Kingdoms of Central Europe, namely Hungary. In fact, after the death of the Hungarian King, Andrew III, the last of the Árpád Dynasty, the Hungarian throne was succeeded by Anzhuins based on marital relations. Since 1308 Anzhuins were actual possessors of Hungary and Croatia and at the same time they were involved in medieval Albanian politics. Considering that at the Peace Treaty of Zadar, Venice renounced the east coast of Adriatic, Hungarian Anzhuins became followers of Neapolitan tradition in Albania and at the same time, being long connected with Catholicism, Hungarians protected this element from Serbian shizmatics and simultaneously sustained Albanian rulers in northern parts of Albania with regard to the consolidation of their state. Such a policy of linking Hungary with Albanian territories continued during other ruling dynasties as well, respectively Sigismund of Luxemburg, rulers of Hunyadi dynasty and that of Habsburg.

In political combinations aimed at coming to power, it is reflected family connection of feudal claimants. Thus, the Queen Maria of Naples was the sister of the Hungarian King Wladyslaw IV and she claimed that her son, who enjoyed the support of Pope, ascend the throne of the Hungarian Kingdom. This was realized at the time of his successors, namely Charles Anzhuin, the Hungaro-Croatian King 1341-1342<sup>4</sup>. This dynasty continued to hold the crown of St. Stephen for several years, namely during the reign of Ludwig 1342-1382, when the throne passed into the hands of Sigismund of Luxembourg, the Czech

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<sup>4</sup> F. Šišić, *Pregled povijesti hrvatskoga naroda*, Zagreb, 1962, p. 214.

King, Maria's husband, the daughter of Ludwig Anzhuin<sup>5</sup>. While one Anzhuin branch was related to Hungary, the other branch operating from Naples continued attempts to strengthen its position in Albania. Hence, Philip of Tarent, nephew of Charles I Anzhuin, landed in 1304 and restored Durres thereby recovering again the Anzhuin Kingdom of Arbëria that had been ruined in 1286. Even in this case, Anzhuins were forced to consider the role of the local feudal lords, providing for them privileges they had earlier enjoyed by Philip's predecessor, Charles I. So, the Albanian feudal lord Gulielm Blinisht, was appointed in 1304 as marshal of Arbëria by Anzhuins. Given that his plans were challenged by the Serbian ruler Milutin, who like Philip of Tarent held the title "King and suzerain of Arbëria", Anzhuins organized in support of the Pope a coalition with Hungary and Croatia included. The Pope appealed to bishops who had crowded the Albanian churches to help Anzhuins. Upon the mediation of Catholic prelates, in June and July 1319, it was proclaimed the papal decree addressed to Albanian aristocracy from Buna to Vjosa<sup>6</sup>. The historical events taking place at this time between Hungary, Croatia and Albania had a common denominator which was the Anzhuin dynasty. Strengthening of both branches was developed in parallel with one branch in Hungary represented by Charles I, while the other in Naples. The Naples branch, due to the territorial proximity, was much more interested in events in Albania, and accordingly the Anzhuin King Robert appointed his son Charles as captain of Durres. This ruler was nicknamed "Durrsaku" and for a certain period managed to be also the King of both Hungary and Croatia<sup>7</sup>. In fact, among Anzhuins of Naples, there were two feudal lords named Charles who, besides their name, carried the nickname "Durrsaku" as well. One was the son of Gjon Anzhuin called Charles Durrsaku I who had died in 1348, while the other was called with the same

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> M. Shuflai, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Tiranë, 2002, p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> F. Šišić, *Pregled povijesti f. hrvatskoga naroda*, Zagreb, 1962, p. 214.

name but was considered as Charles Durrsaku II who had died in 1386<sup>8</sup>.

The Anzhuin dynasty, which ruled in Hungary, reached its political climax at the time of Ludwig 1342-1382. At this time Albanian families in Albanian territories rose up claiming independence from foreign crowns, more specifically ensuring such relations with the European royal courts that would accept them as autonomous owners within their own territories. Thus, Tanush Topia, owner of lands between Mat and Shkumbin was recognized as ruler in his possessions and tenure, since 1338 from Rome and King Robert Anzhuin of Naples taking the title of Count from the Kingdom of Arbëria<sup>9</sup>. Yet, Tanushi broke up relations with Anzhuins due to the abduction of the daughter of King Robert, who was betrothed to a prince in Greece. This mishap cost Tanush and his wife their life, who were both treacherously executed by Robert in Naples. Tanush's successor was his son Karl, who, according to some data was described as the nephew, whereas according to some other data, he was considered as the son of Tanush Topia. Whatever the truth, in 1359 he became the ruler of the whole Arbëria, proclaiming himself as a ruler of Anzhuin blood. To strengthen this position and tribal ties with Anzhuins, he introduced along with his emblem, Anzhuin elements, such as the flower of lily associated with a lion standing up on his feet. Strengthening of Hungarians Anzhuins grew larger after the Treaty of Zadar, where Venice was forced to renounce the eastern coast of Adriatic, recognizing to Hungarian Anzhuins the right to represent themselves as followers of Neapolitan Anzhuin tradition in Albania as well. The Peace of Turin in 1381 assured once again the acquired position of Hungary in the Adriatic as opposed to Venice. Hungary in this case gained an area of interests that extended up to Durrës<sup>10</sup>. However, the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> AAI-I, Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia, Coleg Thalotzcy L. – Jireček C. – Sufflay E., vol. I-II, Vindobonae 1913-1918 doc. 816, p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> L.V. Thaloczy, Die Albanische diaspora, IAF, I Band, Munchen und Leipzig, 1916, p. 299-341.

Hungarian influence did not manage to penetrate in the internal parts of Albanian territories, where independent political formations operated. In fact, Hungarians, concretely Hungarian Anzhuins taking advantage of the favorable political position sought to make Albanian territories as their own part, as they had already acted long ago with Croats. By this time, Albanian coast became the political arena of efforts aimed at a dominant position from Venice, Hungary and strengthened local feudal lords. Indeed, Karl Topia, in the battle to capture the city of Durres encountered Venice resistance and, to acquire support, allied with Hungary. In order to maintain the alliance with Hungarians, Karl relinquished from Durres in favor of Hungarian Anzhuins. Thus, in 1373 Durrës and Kotor were placed into service of Hungarian King Ludwig. Karl Topia, now linked with Hungarians, was an important member of the anti-Venetian League "Liga domini nostri regis hungariae"<sup>11</sup>. It appears that Karl Topia had voluntarily conceded Durrës to Hungarians shortly after he had captured it in order to ensure Hungarian support for his other steps against Venice. No doubt, in strengthening relations between Topia family and Hungary, Karl Topia's uncle, Dominik, had a significant impact. Dominik, as a general Vicar for Dalmatia was appointed with the help of Hungarians as the General Bishop of Korčula.

Dominik's links and his frequent trips in the royal court of Ludwig were influenced also by the fact that Dominicans operating in Albania, at their beginnings had come from Hungary, but also by the fact that Dominik had initially been chaplain of the Anzhuin court in Naples, where he was befriended with Anzhuins. However, relations between Topia family and Hungarian Anzhuins were not stable for a long time. In 1382 Ludwig died and for a certain period the Hungarian royal court was overwhelmed by the strife for power that would bring to the throne Sigismund of Luxembourg, who would make

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<sup>11</sup> M. Shufflai, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Tiranë, 2002, p. 130.

efforts to continue these relations, and even expand them with other Albanian feudal lords, namely with Balshaj family, dictated among others, also by the fact that upon the death of Karl Topia in 1388, Gjergj's heir was not capable of continuing his father's policy. However, the importance of Topia family for Hungary did not easily fade and attempts of the Hungarian throne to find allies among Topia family would continue at the time of Sigismund as well. This is revealed by a note of Ragusans who drew attention to the Hungarian King Sigismund that Andrea Topia had in his offices only Serbian notaries and in the event he received a letter in Latin language, he was forced to send it in the coast area offices for translation, so that the content of letters could no longer be a secret<sup>12</sup>. From this note we understand that in the 30s of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sigismund and Andrea Topia maintained an active correspondence and in Slavic language.

## **2. HUNGARY AND ARBNOR DYNASTY OF BALSHAJ FAMILY**

Tradition of the Albanian feudal lords' relations with Hungary was followed also by the powerful Balshaj family. Relations between Balshaj family and Hungary were dictated by several factors. First, these relations dealt with strengthening of the alliance against the common enemy such as Venice and the Ottoman Empire. Second, Balshaj family maintained direct relations with bans of Dalmatia and Croatia who were also under the sovereignty of the Hungarian Kingdom<sup>13</sup>. Balshaj family found themselves in the vortex of the politics that took place between Hungary and Venice. Considering Hungary less risky than Venice probably because of the geographical distance, Balshaj family and Topia family as well, earlier

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<sup>12</sup> I. Božić, *Albanija i Arbanasi tokom XIII, XIV i XV veka*, Glas SANU, CCCXXXVII, knjiga 3, Beograd, 1983, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> 1382, *Unam literam domino Balse per illum ambasiatorem domini Betrici: 1395 ambasiatoribus bani Croatie ad dominum Juran de Balse, M. Shufflai, Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, p. 227.

resorted to rapprochement with Hungary. In this context, Hungary and Venice contended each politically to attract Balshaj family. Thus, in a notice of 1373, Ragusans notified the King Ludwig of Hungary that ships had arrived bringing a Venetian ambassador to the Prince of Zeta, Gjergj I Balsha. The ambassador required the assistance of Gjergj against Hungary and to that effect, Venetians had promised him to concede the cities of Kotor and Durrës, which at that time were under the control of the Hungarian King<sup>14</sup>. In the political struggle for dominance to the Adriatic in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Venice managed to partially restore the lost position at the Peace Treaty of Zadar and Turin, among others, even due to the fact that Hungary had started to be directly posed to the risk of being threatened by Ottomans. Meanwhile, in this connection, Venice felt itself well away from such a risk. Actually, as to the Albanian territories, Venice tried as opposed to Ottomans to put them before *fait accompli* capturing important cities before they fell into their hands. On the other hand, however, Venice took care in this case not to inflict anger to Hungary with such actions. Venice did not want the presence of Hungary in the Adriatic Sea and neither their relations with Balshaj family even if they were directed for purposes of anti-Ottoman war. Thus, when in 1392 Hungary was preparing a crusade against the Ottomans, Gjergj II Balsha while following his predecessors' policy, as an ally to Hungary, expressed his desire to participate in the crusade, but Venice refused his help<sup>15</sup>. Upon ascendancy to the throne of Gjergj II Strazimiri from Balshaj family, this ruler as well, was faced with two old animosities inherited by his predecessors, namely with the Turks and the other with the Bosnian King Tvrtko. Indeed, Ottoman attacks in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century reached to the areas of Northern Albania, and moreover, Ottoman incursions took place even in Southeastern Bosnia. Venice tried to take advantage of this dangerous situation, but at the same time it

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<sup>14</sup> M. Shufflai, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, p. 130-131.

<sup>15</sup> A. Gegaj, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu dhe Arbëria*, Tuz, 2004, p. 60.

took care not to violate provisions of the Treaty with Hungary, which banned possession of property and cities from Kvarner to Corfu. Accordingly, when Gjergj Strazimiri Balsha in a fix between Ottomans and Venetians, proposed to the latter to concede Shkodra and the surrounding provinces, because he could not defend them, Venetians were careful in two directions. First, they did not want to engage themselves at war with Turks and second, in the Senate of the Republic there were attempts to find an excuse whereby seizing control of the cities already offered would not be considered a violation of the treaty. Therefore, in 1396, Gjergj II Strazimiri surrendered Shkodra into the hands of Venice along with all its territories and revenues of this city<sup>16</sup>. In my opinion, Gjergj considered such surrender as an interim measure as he hoped that with the help of the anti-Ottoman powers, namely Hungary, he would resume control of those cities. This task would be taken over by the next heir of Balshaj family, the so-called Balsha III, but without any apparent success. Hungary wanted to keep Balshaj family tied up in its camp, by not being reluctant to accord to them high nobility and ruling titles in order to prevent their cooperation with Venice. With that in mind, the struggle between the two rivals to attract Balshaj family shows their role in the political life of Albania and beyond. Thus, after the unfortunate battle of Nikopol, Sigismund the King of Hungary, upon return from the battlefield already lost, remained for a certain period in Ragusa. In this case, he had conferred on Gjergj II Balsha the title "Principis Albaniae" (Prince of Albania)<sup>17</sup>. Gjergj was also appointed Prince of Korčula and Lesina in Croatia<sup>18</sup>. Gjergj's contacts with Hungary continued later as indirectly understood from a letter

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<sup>16</sup> I. Božić, *Albanija i Arbanasi tokom XIII, XIV i XV veka*, Glas SANU, CCCXXXVII, knjiga 3, Beograd, 1983, p.59.

<sup>17</sup> AAI-II, *Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis ilustrantia*, Coleg Thalotzcy L. – Jireček C. – Sufflay E., vol. I-II, Vindobonae 1913-1918 doc. 537, p. 245.

<sup>18</sup> AAI-II, dok. 579 "Georgi Balsiqi unsularum Carzule et Lesine Contis de 29 ianuari 1397 est scriptum, quad Nunus tituluque principis Albaniae a Sigismundo Hungariae rege pos pagnom...".

dated 8 June 1406, in which case Venetians responded to the request of the Hungarian King Sigismund and Hrvoje Vojvoda, who committed themselves that Venice return to Gjergj Strazimiri the properties taken<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ljubić, *Listine o odnošaju između južnog Slavenstava i Mletačke republike V*, Zagreb, 1878 p. 78, letter, datet, Jun 8, 1406.