

Dimension of Skanderbeg's relations with the Holy See in the face of Ottoman invasions

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Abstract:

One of the countries with which Skanderbeg had ongoing relationships and of a particular importance was the Holy See in Rome. In the 15th century, Rome represented, as it does today, the universal center of the Catholic Church (Holy See) and the capital of a powerful political state (papal state). As a Holy See, its jurisdiction extended to all structures of Catholic Church, hence, in Albanian territories as well.

The advancement of the Ottoman armies in the Balkans, their approach to the borders of the Catholic Hungary, their outlet on the Adriatic coast, the aim of the sultans to penetrate into Central Europe and to cross the Italian Peninsula, had seriously worried Rome. The concern of Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) grew even more after the Council of Florence (1439), where his projects for a joint crusade with the Eastern Church prove unsuccessful. It is precisely in these circumstances that Skanderbeg's resistance against the Ottoman armies gained a special strategic, political, military and ecclesial importance for Rome, both as a church and state.

This study, mainly based on unpublished sources, those published in Latin and a rich bibliography, will treat the role of the Albanians and their warrior-king, George Kastrioti Skanderbeg in relation to the Holy See in the face of Ottoman invasions.

Key words: George Kastrioti Skanderbeg, the Holy See, Albania, Ottoman Empire, Pope

Geographical position of Arbëria (today Albania) between East and West, had led the Holy See to be interested that the Albanian did resist at all costs to the Turkish-Ottoman invasion. Furthermore, along with Hungary and Bosnia, Arbëria was considered, as Basilio Pandzic writes, one of the three neuralgic points of the Crusade, which Pope Eugene IV had proclaimed on 26 May 1443.¹ Skanderbeg, on the other hand, had undisputed interest to ensure support and help of the Papal State. This ground of joint interests laid down political relations between Skanderbeg and the Holy See. Such circumstances would make it possible that the leadership of the anti-Turkish Crusade, which for the time was an international political-military alliance with the aim to preserve the security of European countries against the ottoman invasion, be entrusted to George (Albanian: Gjergj) Kastrioti. First of all, it should be noted that, since there was no divergence of interests between the two parties concerned, this fact enabled Skanderbeg and his diplomats to enjoy the support of the Holy See in their diplomatic and military activity in the service of the Albanian State.

Skanderbeg's first contacts with Pope's representatives, seemed to have started at least since when the rebellion of 1443 was about to start. But true relations with the Holy See were established some years later, when Skanderbeg proved that he was a prominent captain and that Albanian people should be regarded as an important factor in their anti-Turkish Crusade projects. Such interest of the Holy See for Skanderbeg grew and strengthened especially through the dissemination of Skanderbeg reputation as a strategist in the war against the Turks. It was the loss of the battle of Varna (1443-1444), which ultimately, shifted Pope's attention to Skanderbeg.² The failure

¹ Basilio Panzić, "I francescani a servizio dell'Albania nell'epoca di Scanderbeg", *V Convegno Internazionale di Studi Albanesi (Atti IX 1968)*, Palermo: Centro Internazionale Di Studi Albanesi 1968, p.179.

² In 1444, the sultan negotiated a ten-year truce with the Christians, which the Christians almost immediately violated. Together with King Ladislaus, Hunyadi

of this joint venture, which gained the support of the Papacy, caused dissatisfaction to the latter. In these circumstances, the Skanderbeg's emergence on the stage of history, brought a new light to the expectations and plans of the Popes.

In the field of foreign partnership, a positive signal came from Rome, since 22 December 1445. Pope Eugene IV appointed Pal Engjëlli (Latin: Paulus Angelus 1416-1470), as the bishop of Drivasto,³ a move which would significantly promote relations with the Pope in the ecclesiastical and diplomatic field.

The one, who assessed Skanderbeg as a factor in Rome's projects, was the successor of Eugene IV, Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455), who as soon as ascending St. Peter's throne (1447), started to think about Albania that represented a hope for Christian Europe, which in turn, was posed to the Turkish threat. Skanderbeg, who had always had as a fundamental objective - the liberation of his country's territories and the Crusade, chose to follow the emergence of its main inspirer, namely the Pope. On the other hand, revival of the Crusade would somehow diminish confrontations between Italian states (*the hostility of the Duke of Milan and Naples with Venice*) and would give to Skanderbeg the opportunity to attract attention. The ensuing events, would soon confirm such approach of Skanderbeg to the Pope and Alfonso V of Aragon.

marched through Bulgaria, determined once and for all to drive the Turks out of Europe. The crusaders made steady progress, though Ottoman resistance increased as they pushed closer to the capitol at Edirne. Then, on November 10, 1444, at the city of Varna on the banks of the Black Sea, they met the army of Murad himself. Outnumbered four to one, the Christians were put to rout, and Ladislaus was killed on the field. Hunyadi barely escaped with his life. On the way home, he fell into the hands of the Wallachian ruler Vlad Dracul. There was apparently no love lost between the two men, and Vlad kept him prisoner for some time in Wallachia.

Upon reaching home, Hunyadi took his place in the interim government, a panel of noblemen. In 1446 they chose Albert's young son, Ladislaus V, as the new king. As Ladislaus was a six-year-old child (and, until 1452, a virtual hostage in Vienna), Hunyadi ruled Hungary as regent. (Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204-1571, vol.II: The fifteenth century*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978, pp.82-90; Joseph Held, Camden, N. I, "Hunyadi's Long Campaign and the Battle of Varna 1443-1444", *Ungarn-Jahrbuch: Zeitschrift für die Kunde Ungarns und verwandte Gebiete*, Band. 16 (München 1988) pp. 13, 23-24.)

³ *Statutet dhe urdhëresat e Kapitullit të Kishës Katedrale të Drishtit*, prepared by M. Ahmeti dhe E. Lala, Tiranë: OMBRA GVG 2009, p. 83.

Since 20 June 1447, this same Pope sent the Franciscan Antonio de Oliveto as "*nuncio of the Apostolic See in the areas of Arberia and Dalmatia*" (ad partes Albaniae et Sclavoniae), who may be the first Apostolic nuncio coming officially as such in Albania, advised to do his utmost to convince the Christian proponents to provide their support in the war against the Turks led by George Kastrioti Skanderbeg, where it is explicitly cited: "*let's give to our beloved son, the noble man George Kastrioti - lord in Albania, our support and help against the Turks*",⁴ while promising that through such a help they would be released from censorship and those who were under the authority of the Holy See. After a while, the Pope took the opportunity to extol Skanderbeg publicly. In a *papal brief* issued on 12 July 1447, which he handed over to the Nuncio in question, the Pope congratulated Skanderbeg for the successful war he was waging against the Turks; he called him "*very strong athlete in defense of the Christian faith* (Orthodoxae fidei fortissimus Athleta) in defense of the Christian faith and "*fearless warrior* " (intrepidus pugil)⁵ in defense of honor, growth and stability of the Christian religion in towns and villages of Albania, and especially in the town of Kruja. This may be the first official act by which the Holy See entered into relationships with Skanderbeg.

Above all, it's a testament to his longevity that he survived long enough to have three Popes give him sweet nicknames while basically being involved in a never-ending war with a significantly more-powerful adversary.

⁴ In the letter he wrote: "... nostrum et Sedis apostolicae Nuncium, ad praesens mittimus, cupientes illas tibi iacere concessionem, in quarum vim christifidelibus carum partium tu possis gratiorem reddere ac utiliorem... Caeterum, quia cupimus dilecto filio, nobili viro Georgio Castrioto, Domino in Albania, a fidelibus christianis favores et praesidia praestari adversus Turcas...", *Bullarium Franciscanum continens constitutiones, epistolas, diplomata Romanorum pontificum Eugenii IV et Nicolai V ad tres ordines S. P. N. Francisci spectantia*. Collegit et edidit Fr. Ulrichus Hüntemann O.F.M. lector iubilatus. Nova Series. Tomus I. (1431-1455). Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), MCMXXIX, doc.1071, p.540; Panzić, "I francescani a servizio dell'Albania", pp. 185-186.

⁵ Fan Stylian Noli, *George Castrioti Scanderbeg (1405-1468)*, Boston, 1945, pp.200-201.

In an effort to uphold Skanderbeg's prestige among members of the League, Pope Nicholas V was also engaged in the reconciliation of Skanderbeg with Dukagjini family aware that the conflict between them had arisen also as a result of pressures exerted by Venice on Pal and Lek Dukagjini, to urge them against the Albanian League. These actions of Venice to Dukagjini family not only were considered as a serious threat by Skanderbeg but also by the Pope himself. Therefore, he threw into action Paulus Angelus who for two and a half years had been bishop of Drivasto and whose mission was: to alleviate contradictions between Dukagjini family and Skanderbeg.⁶ In fact, the Pope's contribution to the issue of Dukagjini family was a direct reflection of his efforts to promote the southwestern Balkan front in the context of preparations for the attack coming from the Hunyadi front.

Pope Nicholas V, in the framework of strengthening relations with Arbëria, and in the capacity of *Nuncio* and commissary apostolic in Arbëria, Bulgaria and Rascia, appointed on 21 September, 1451 the Albanian Franciscan, Father Eugene Sume.⁷ These initial actions, namely appointment of Antoinio de Oliveto (first ambassador of the Holy See in Albanian territories) and his replacement on 21 September 1451 by an Albanian Franciscan, Eugene Sume, tasked as *nuncio* and commissary Apostolic, including apart from *Arberia and Bulgaria also Rascia*, show the attention that the Papal State was paying to Albanian areas in general and to Skanderbeg in particular.

The battle for the defense of Kruja by the Turkish armies' siege, during 1450, had alerted the European powers and especially the Papacy. Since April that same year, the Pope had proclaimed the Jubilee Bull, the essence of which was to raise money for the Crusade. In the framework of these

⁶ Kristo Frashëri, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu: jeta dhe vepra*, Tiranë: ASHSH, 2002, p.53.

⁷ *Bullarium Franciscanum*, n.s.I, doc.1506, p.756-758; Panzić, "I francescani a servizio dell'Albania", p.187.

preparations, also the activity of the Albanian military contingent commanded by Skanderbeg remained always current. By strategically assessing Skanderbeg's appeals, the Pope addressed specifically to Ragusa whose Crusade credentials were much more stable than those of Venice. With the Pope's letter in hand, Skanderbeg travelled to Ragusa to obtain subsidies.⁸ This trip is confirmed by the Ragusan envoy in Rome, *Gjon Gazulli*, in the retrospective report he delivered before the Pope on 27 February, 1451, where, after dwelling on Skanderbeg's difficult situation at that period, stated that: "*He, Skanderbeg, left home and went to the city of Ragusa with the letters of your Holiness, through which your Holiness urged the authorities of this city to help and subsidize Skanderbeg*".⁹ By engaging Ragusa which "*the Holiness's instructions ... considered as orders*", the Pope was preparing the ground that Skanderbeg, along with his domain, be supported to be engaged as an estimated striking force in the anti-ottoman global strategy. Skanderbeg, not only had resisted to the siege of the Sultan, but upon the Pope's support, had also given prominent

⁸ Državni Arhiv u Dubrovnik (DAD), *Consili Rogatorum*, XI, 272r-272v; Jovan Radonić, *Durađ Kastriot Skenderbeg i Arbanija u XV veku: istoriska grada*, (Spomenik SKA XCV), Beograd: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1942, doc. 34.

⁹ The Ragusan ambassador, who went to Rome on 27 February 1451, in the Holy See informs Pope Nicholas V: "...a questo anno proximo passato [1450], siando venuto el dicto Turcho et el suo fiolo sopra el dicto Schanderbegh et soi colligati cum potentissimi exerciti et aparati de guerra, et siando accordati col detto Turcho li detti colligati de Schandarbegh, habiando esso Schandarbegh perso tutto lo suo paese, salvo che la città de Cruya, la qual esso Turcho non potè vincere per l'asperità de monti et fortezza del dicto luogo et per la fidelità delle persone che erano in essa, che se portono virilmente, se deliberò el dicto Turcho levarse dalla dicta citade de Cruya. E cosi, siando levato et partito dalle parte d'Albania, dubitandose esso Schandarbegh, si per la rebellion delli soi sudditi, si per l'accordio delli soi colligati fatto col detto Turcho, non poter tegnir et conservar la dicta citade de Cruya et rehavere el suo paese, maxime perchè non haveva con che substentar le guardie et difese, poste per lui in la detta citade, se parti esso Schandarbegh da casa sua et venne a la detta città de Ragusa cum lettere della Vostra Sanctitate, per le qual essa Sanctitate exhortava el rezimento della detta citade ad aiutar et subvenir el detto Schandarbegh", Radonić, *Durađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.36; Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, (1204-1571)*, volume II, p.102, note.81; B. Krekić, *Dubrovnik (Raguse) et le Levant*, Paris and the Hague 1961, this one being no.1209, p.370.

Crusader character to Kruja issue by closing all paths to unilateral policies in relation to the Albanian factor.¹⁰

Through the next Papal *Bull*, issued on 13 April, 1451, we learn that Pope Nicholas V, ordered the bishop of Kotor, *Bonino de Tollentis*, Archbishop of Ragusa (Vicar General), *Jakob* and the Rector of the Grand St. Peter church of Ragusa, *Gjon Gazulli*, to give to the lord of *Kruja and Arberia*, namely George Kastrioti Skanderbeg or his ambassadors, a certain part from the amount of money collected by the indulgence of the jubilee year 1450, as well as to push Skanderbeg in his war against Turks.¹¹ In this decree, it was also said that a part (indulgence) would be accorded for three years to all those who, in cash or in person, would support George Kastrioti for participation in the anti-Turkish Crusade. Therefore, Pope Nicholas V was strengthening Skanderbeg's *de jure* engagement with the Crusade, through an ecclesial act, which raised him on the pedestal of the most prominent figures of the time for contributing to the defense of European civilization. Hence, Skanderbeg was gradually succeeding to connect *de jure* and *de facto* the anti-Ottoman war of Albanian people to that of the European powers of the time, thus internationalizing its war.

The key idea of the Pope Nicholas V, as part of his anti-Turkish efforts, was to drive out Turks, which would be possible only if the Christian countries joined forces. This demand became even more immediate after the conquest of Constantinople in May 1453 by Mehmed II, who proclaimed it the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Under these conditions, when Mehmed II, was leading his attention towards Hungary and Italy, the Albanian resistance had to gain special attention. Now, it was also Pope Nicholas V, who among others, responded to Skanderbeg's request for the promised aid for

¹⁰ Virgjil Kule, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu: kryqtari i fundit*, Tiranë: Fast Track Albania, 2012, pp.153-154

¹¹ DAD, *Acta Sanctae Mariae Maioris*, seac XV, fasc.I, no.31 (Roma, 13 April 1451); Radonić, *Đurađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.40.

resistance, giving him a previously promised financial aid of 5000 golden coins (*quinque milia aureorum*).¹²

In the framework of the Crusade preparations taking place at the beginning of 1454, Skanderbeg continued contacts with Rome to give to the Pope and cardinals a detailed account of the military role he could play in this part of the Balkans. This would be a good opportunity to disseminate as much information as possible among the ambassadors and representatives of the Italian state about Skanderbeg and the war he was fighting. The representative himself of the Duchy of Milan to Rome, Sceva de Curte, corrected himself when writing to his own chief: "*this Skanderbeg ... is not Turkish, but Christian Albanians*".¹³ With the desire to correctly demonstrate the participation in the Crusade and the use of donated funds, on the occasion of granting a papal assistance of 3,000 ducats - golden coins, and about 1,000 ducats in gifts, Skanderbeg stated that he would not use such money at all, and that he would use it only if the Turks would really attack. He even proposed that the Holy See pays him the assistance each month; in the event the enemy did not appear, he pledged that the amounts of money would be returned.¹⁴

While during February 1455, Pope Nicholas V was preparing the Papal Bull for the creation of Italic League, which envisaged a 25-year peace between them, he died on 25 March, 1455. Pope Calixtus III, who shortly after (8 April, 1455) would succeed Nicholas V, devoted his entire pontificate to the war against Turkish invaders. In his testament, there is an oath citing that he would resort to all his forces to regain Constantinople.

¹² Fan S. Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu* (1405-1468), vepra 4, Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1968, Appendix, doc.8.

¹³ "... *non ne Turcho anci è christiano Albanexe*", Radonić, *Durađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.76.

¹⁴ "...*non volle tohare denari...e fara bona cautione de restituire el tutto el Turcho veramente*", Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, Tiranë: K&B 2008, p.167, note.243.

On 15 May, 1455, Pope Calixtus III reaffirmed the Bull for Crusade, which had been issued by his predecessor in September the same year. However, the military strategy of Calixtus III differed somewhat from that of his predecessor. His objective was to have support by land on Albanian and Hungarian fronts, while by sea a combined attack of Western fleet of ships would be organized. In this sense, it can be said that Skanderbeg-led Albanian uprising took fundamental value in the crusader plans of Pope Calixtus III.

In a document issued by the Pope's offices on 9 June, 1457, we learn that Calixtus III, wrote to George Kastrioti stating that he knows and appreciates his noble origin, that he has heard about damages Turks had inflicted on Albanian people and commends him about victories against Turkish armies. At the same time, he sent notice that he was dispatching an armed *Galea* and also equipped with instructions for help against Turks.¹⁵

Time would show that Calixtus not only offered just fine words, but also sent a fleet of Papacy (*classe nostra*) in Albania waters. So, while on one side he congratulated George Kastrioti about the heroic war fought against the Turks, on the other hand, he ordered a part of his military fleet to approach to Albanian shores in aid of Skanderbeg. Also, on 1 September, 1457, the Pope gave instructions to the commissioner for Crusade issues in Albania, Gjon Navarro (John Navarre), to divide the revenue collected for the anti-Turkish crusade between the kings of Hungary, Bosnia and lord of Albania, George Kastrioti.¹⁶ From these revenues, one third of the total funds collected in Ragusa, was ordered to be given to Skanderbeg. Meanwhile, on 11 September, 1457 at the Papal

¹⁵ "Nos, dilecte fili, de tua nobilitate semper optimam opinionem habuimus cognovimusque quanta perseverantia et quam strenue in partibus illis prope solus obstiteris sevissimis Turchis satagentibus...", Radonić, *Đurađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.140.

¹⁶ "en manadavimus, ut devotioni tue ex nonnullis pecuniis propter sanctam Cruciatam Ragusii et per Dalmatiam collectis, certa pars tibi consignetur...", Ibid., doc.151.

Chancellery a letter was drafted which raises Skanderbeg above all the other Catholic Princes: "*We have heard that you distinguished yourself above all Catholic rulers thanks to your high capacity and deeds you have done for the Christian faith and religion ...*".¹⁷ The news of Skanderbeg example, that "*he did not bow down before the whole offensive rage and cruelty of enemies*" would be transmitted to all believers and shake them up. It follows then the famous statement: "*... there is no one who does not know how things go to that extent as not to uplift with the greatest praise, and not to talk about your Highness like that of a true athlete and a warrior of the Christian name*".¹⁸ The men receiving so much praise, was again promised by Calixtus III armaments and help due to be prepared during the winter. He fervently asked Skanderbeg not to step back from defeats: "*We aren't pronouncing these words for nothing, but our words will be proved by facts.*" The Pope ended his open letter with the call to unite all forces by land and sea "*to exterminate this plague*".¹⁹

Victory of Albanian forces at the Battle of *Ujëbardha* (Albulena) in September 1457 seems to have restored hopes to papal projects of the Crusade. This victory over a large Turkish army of 60-80 thousand men was marked by history as the first victory of Skanderbeg in the context of a genuine international front. He came out of this war with an undisputed reputation both domestically and internationally. This war was treated as such by Western chancelleries as well. Thus, two months after the news of the victory arrived in Rome, Pope Calixtus III appointed Skanderbeg on 23 December, 1457 under the

¹⁷ *Acta Albaniae Vaticana I: res Albaniae saeculorum XIV et XV atque cruciatam spectantia*, [Ignazio Parrino] Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1971, doc.228.

¹⁸ "*... nemo enim est tam ignarus serum, qui non summis laudibus ad celum te extollat et de tua nobilitate tanquam de vero athleta et propugnatore nominis christiani non loquatur*", Radonić, *Đurađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, dok.151. In a letter to Duke Francesco Sforca of Milan, dated October 8 1457, it was stated: "*Subventionem Scanderbecho fortissimo Christi Athlete non modicam prebuimus*", Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.330, note.226.

¹⁹ *Acta Albaniae Vaticana I*, dok.260; Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.330.

Pontifical decree "*The General Captain of the Holy See*" in the war against the Turks.²⁰

Pope's efforts to help Skanderbeg never ceased, even putting pressure on Ragusa to hand over to Skanderbeg the money collected. In the course of 1457, the Pope sent his representative, Gjon Navarri, in Ragusa to raise money on behalf of the Holy See and to divide them between the kings of Hungary, Bosnia and Skanderbeg. The Pope's authorized persons, *Gjon Navarri* and *Friar Mariano de Senis* insisted, in the final analysis, even by threatening excommunication and banning sacraments, that Ragusa hand over to Skanderbeg the money preserved there for the Crusade, but the Council, which was expecting an Ottoman victory, dragged on such a handover. The Pope dispatched to Ragusa, letter after letter; he ordered that apart from Ragusan money, Skanderbeg would be handed over also Albanians' money for the Crusade (19 September, 1457). His persistence did not stop throughout winter. As early as February 1458, Skanderbeg's envoys appeared before the Pope who informed him on recent events; on this occasion Skanderbeg was explicitly mentioned as a "*Christian prince*" (*princeps catholicus*).²¹ In a letter given to the envoy, the Pope expressed his regret for sending only 5000 golden coins to Albanian warrior-leaders, hoping that this amount would be increased in the coming days. In addition, on 8 February, 1458, the Pope sent a letter to Alfonso V, informing him on the funds he himself gave to Skanderbeg and urged him that as previously, he should help again Skanderbeg in the war against Turks. On this occasion, the Pope emphasized the importance of the Albanian bulwark.

On the other hand, he expressed even more praising words about George Kastrioti: he thanked God that Skanderbeg was resisting to the Ottoman hordes in the Christian world like

²⁰ Filipo Milloshević, "Politika orientale e Kaliksit III dhe Shqipëria", in: G.Valentini, *Skënderbeu dhe Papati 1442-1467 (studime dhe tekste)*, Tiranë: Plejada, 2013, p.182; Frashëri, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, p.357.

²¹ Radonić, *Durad Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.153-155, 159-164, 166-168.

a "strong wall", thereby overwhelming himself with glory. What, if many other catholic princes owned your bravery! Then the Pope would be less concerned about protecting the faith. *"Keep, my son, to your own loyalty, your holy rescuing aim, because, since you fight for faith in Christ, you bring hopes that he, for whom nothing is impossible ... that he will never abandon you, but will offer to you the glorious triumph over his enemies"*.²²

The same letter proves also that Skanderbeg is now a factor of great importance in the joint plans at European level: *"as regard the meeting we will hold with the envoys of the Emperor, Kings and Christian Princes concerning measures to be taken against the Turks, we have made this known to your Lordship, in another letter"*.²³

Indeed, a papal squadron rushed to the aid of Skanderbeg and on 3 June, 1458, the Pope instructed Michele Borgian to travel back to Albania,²⁴ but shortly after, on June 30, Calixtus III passed away. Although he failed to offer Christian assistance to rebels, as he would otherwise wished, still during the Crusades, his activity helped greatly in bringing fame to Skanderbeg name in the West.

It is not without purpose that Calixtus III had repeatedly recalled the Belgrade siege, the liberation of which was highly glorified as a great victory by the Catholic Church. This is because there had died from an epidemic John Hunyadi, who for a long time had been the most renowned figure in the West as an warrior against the Turks. Now Skanderbeg remained the only symbolic figure of the Christian resistance, which was regarded as a model for others. Thus, while

²² *"Persevera, fili carissime, in devotione et in sancto et salubri proposito suo, nam cum pro fide Xpi certes sperare debes eum, cui nihil est impossibile et forcia queque parvis confundit, quod te non desert, sed victoriam gloriosam de suis hostibus tibi dabit"*, Ibid., doc.168.

²³ *"Convocationem quam facimus oratorum imperatoris, regum et principum chritianorum super prosequenda amprisia contra Turchum jam tue nobilitati per alias litteras significavimus"*, Ibid.

²⁴ *Acta Albaniae Vaticana* I, dok.340; Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.331.

congratulating the King of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus, on the occasion of the King's coronation, the Pope Calixtus III reminded the young king of the uncompromising war fought by the papal navy and the army of George Kastrioti Skanderbeg.²⁵

After the death of Calixtus III, these reflections were taken without any modifications from his successor, the humanist Pope Pius II. Skanderbeg was apparently very happy about the election of Pope Pius II. The papal throne had been ascended by his 53-year old longtime admirer, of the same age, the humanist *Enea Silvio Piccolomini* who was the biggest proponent of European joint actions against Turkish invaders. Similar to his Spanish predecessor, Pius II worked for an alliance of Christian princes in order to drive the Turks out from Europe. He urged the emperor, Italy, France, Burgundy, and also masters across the Balkan from Bosnia to Albania but he encountered into resistance. Inter-Italian tensions, opposition between Louis XI and Burgundy, the new war which had started between the Emperor Frederick III and the new Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus, all these damaged the plan for a Crusade. The Pope called a princely congress in Mantua (spring 1459 - January 1460), but participation of the princes was disappointing.²⁶ Nor did Skanderbeg take part in that conference, who opting to be in temporary peace with the Turks or even because of doubts in the success of this Council, it seems, he preferred to follow the proceedings of the Council in the distance. According to Pius II, one of the main protagonists of the crusader army would be George Kastrioti Skanderbeg, the only glorious captain, already alive in the wars against the Turks commonly known across Europe, after the death of John Hunyadi. In a speech held at the Congress of Mantua, Pius, among others, stated: "... and who will think that the Turks would not be defeated by these crusade armies? George Kastrioti

²⁵ Augustino Theiner, *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram Illustrantia II*, Romae: Typis Vaticanis, 1860, dok.CCCCLXXI.

²⁶ Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.332.

Skanderbeg will join as well with a very strong Albanian army ... “²⁷In short, Pius II, estimated beyond measure the Albanian warrior-king.²⁸

Meanwhile, in Italy the fear from Turks was growing from year to year. Scholars and artists were increasingly dealing with the danger coming from the East, and troubled looks slipped away towards the other shore of the Adriatic coast. The Pope called ceaselessly for the Crusade; he was willing to give himself the first example and to take the lead of the Crusade. Since the beginning Skanderbeg was in the center of the Popes' arrangements and plans. Although Pope Pius II did not receive well the news that a ceasefire had been reached between Skanderbeg and Mehmed II in 1460, he welcomed Albania intervention in support of Ferrante. The same year, 1460, the Pope had spoken with Skanderbeg's envoy, the knight Martin Muzaka in Rome to go in help of Ferdinand and about the ceasefire with the Sultan.²⁹ Basically, Pius II hinted that although he did not give public approval, he would not raise any objections regarding peace with the Turks. Considering the situation by the course of subsequent events and documentary affirmations,³⁰ it appears that Skanderbeg had confidentially assured Pius II that he would break this ceasefire once the crusader army was ready.

Unlike his predecessors, Pius engaged himself also with the history of Kastrioti family, their origin and development. The Pope had long been studying the situation in the Balkan Peninsula, especially in his writing "*De Europa*". He knew that

²⁷ “*Et quis non his copiis superatum irii Turcas arbitratur? His accedet Georgius Scanderbechius ett Albanorum fortissimus manus...*”, Universität Mannheim, sig. Sch 047/295, Pii Secundi Pontificis Max. *Commentarii Rerum memorabilium, quae temporibus suis contigerunt...* Liber Tertius, Romae: Ex Typographia Dominici Basae, 1584, pp.168-169; Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, appendix, doc.24.

²⁸ Biblioteca Kombëtare, sig An.III.B.3, *Pii Secundi Pont. Max. Epistolae. De Conventu Mantvano* [Pius II, Papa], Impressum Mediolani: Per Magistrum Antonium De Zarotis Parmensem MCCCCLXXIII, [179] fl.

²⁹*Acta Albaniae Vaticana* I, dok.465; Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, shtojca, dok.25; Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.332

³⁰ Pii Secundi Pontificis Max. *Commentarii Rerum* (Liber duodecimus), p.607.

a large army could only land at Albania ports, especially in Durres; and that only Albanian space, only *Via Egnatia*, could make possible a rapid penetration into the hinterlands of the Ottoman Empire. He was aware of Albania key position as an important landing place and as a ruling territory of the best strategist in the Balkans. Skanderbeg diplomats gave also a great help in strengthening relations with Pope Pius II: in particular archbishop of Durres Paulus Angelus, who would soon travel to Italy to prepare the war against the Turks.

The real treaties between Pius II, Paulus Angelus and Skanderbeg remain obscure for the most part: in all likelihood they were conducted by the knight Martin Muzaka, who left for Rome on 29 October, 1463 as a "*special envoy*" (nuntius specialis) of Skanderbeg.³¹ This mandate – a credential letter, is considered as the first document of Albanian diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Ambassador Muzaka had been tasked to insist before the cardinals in Rome, to make Albania the starting point of the Crusader attack and to clarify the strategic aspects of this venture.³² October and the first week of November 1463 were months abundant with plans reviews, proposals and counter-proposals. While the Venice insisted before the Pope to start the war at sea, Burgundy and Milan preferred the war on land, starting with the Balkans. From these proposals, it appears that Pope was more inclined towards Albanian land as a starting basis for the Crusade. From Rome, Ambassador Martin Muzaka informed Skanderbeg on the proposal of the Cardinal of Pavia, who stated: "*it can be landed in Albania or Ragusa and the Pope's army shall be summoned there ... and others who will follow the Pope ... Pope said that Albania is a strong country and notwithstanding the*

³¹ Kristo Frashëri, *Skënderbeu dhe lufta shqiptaro-turke në shek.XV*, Tiranë: Toena, 2005, doc.71. According to the researcher M. Ahmeti, the date of issuance of the proclamation of representation by the Ambassador of Skanderbeg to the Holy See, Martin Muzaka, is October 29, 1459. Cfr.: Musa Ahmeti, "Një akt diplomatik i dalur nga kancelaria e Skënderbeut nga viti 1458 – burim me vlerë të rëndësishme për historinë tone kombëtare", *Ekskluzive* no.31 (Prishtinë, 2002), pp.94-96.

³² Frashëri, *Skënderbeu dhe lufta shqiptaro-turke në shek.XV*, doc.71.

*Turks attempts, they would not be able to penetrate rapidly in depth ... From Albania, the Pope's crusader army could easily join those of Hungary ... and especially Skanderbeg would ensure further inland passage".*³³ Estimating the geostrategic position of Albania and the capacity of Albanian prince Skanderbeg, it was eventually planned in Rome that Pope's European troops, which would land in Durrës or Ragusa, would be received from Skanderbeg and March towards the East, while Hungarians and the Venetians would attack from the North and Northeast. Despite objections of Lekë Dukagjini, even Venice, though not very clearly, agreed that Skanderbeg had the joint command of troops.³⁴ This automatically meant that Skanderbeg would command the Pope's crusader army.

From documents it is not clear whether or not Skanderbeg went physically to Rome after his visit made to Ferdinand in Naples. Albanian humanists, Paulus Angelus, M.Barleti (Marinus Barletius) and Dh. Frangu (Demetrio Franco) offer us information that Skanderbeg had held talks with the Pope (maybe not face to face). Whatever the truth is, it is certain that Archbishop Angelus travelled personally in June 1464 to Italy, where Pope Pius II was preparing for the Crusade, which would be set in motion after a few weeks towards Albania. Paulus Angelus went up to Milan with a letter of recommendation from Skanderbeg, where Duke Francesco Sforza gave him a gift of excellent weaponry: probably among them was also a part of that symbol of Albanian crusade – Skanderbeg's helmet, which has the horned goat.³⁵

We do not know in detail what was discussed between the Pope and Skanderbeg, but from indirect reports, it is understood that the Pope decided to reward both Skanderbeg and Archbishop Angelus, with two high titles belonging

³³ Radonić, *Durađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.257.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, doc.258.

³⁵ Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.343.

respectively to the state position for the one, and to ecclesiastical ranking for the other. From written sources offered to us by the above mentioned humanists, it follows that Skanderbeg would be proclaimed King, while Archbishop of Durres, P. Angelus, would be awarded the position of cardinal. According to Barleti and Dh. Frangu, the Pope would come from Ancona and stop in Durres, where was expected to celebrate a magnificent Mass in the city's cathedral church, during which he would give the *Cardinal's mitre* to Angelus and at the same time would put the royal crown on Skanderbeg.³⁶ In addition, Angelus gives such a rough account in his Codex, where reference to the title King for Skanderbeg would leap to everyone's eye.³⁷

In the course of preparations, Skanderbeg was prepared to receive the Pope, who was coming from Ancona to Rome. And then, after the papal fleet joined the Venetian fleet, he would sail across the Adriatic to the Aegean, making a stop in Ragusa and Durres. Furthermore, Skanderbeg decided to wait for the Pope in Ragusa and from there to accompany him to Albania. On 9 August, the Grand Council of Ragusa accepted Skanderbeg's request.³⁸

But Pope Pius II failed to realize his project. Upon his arrival in Ancona, he fell ill and on August 14, 1464, he died. The boat that Ragusa had sent to receive the Pope, returned with the news of his death, which caused deep shock. Skanderbeg's warriors – M.Barletius wrote - were as if lightning had struck them. No other Pope would be engaged alongside Skanderbeg as Pius II did. Inauguration of flags made solemnly from Venice on August 27, 1464, was little

³⁶ Cfr.: Marin Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, Tiranë 1964, p. 440; Demetrius Francus, *Commentario delle cose de Turchi*, et del s. Georgio Scanderbeg, principe di Epiro, con la sua vita... [Venezia : Aldo Manuzio], 1541, 30-30v (in edit.albanian., p.15); Frashëri, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, p. 414.

³⁷ "... regis Albaniae domini Scanderbegi", N. Jorga, *Notes et extraits pour servir a l'histoire des croisades au XV-e siècle*, quatrième serie (1453-1476), Bucures 1915, pp. 194-195, 197.

³⁸ *Chronica Ragusina Junii Resti (ab origine urbis usque ad annum 1451) item Joannis Gundulæ: (1451-1484)*, Zagrabiae: Soc. Typ., 1893, p.370.

consolation to Skanderbeg, who now was alone. However, Skanderbeg decided to persistently continue the war against the Ottoman Empire. He apparently took courage from efforts that the new Pope, Paul II (he succeeded to the throne of *St. Peter* on 16 September, 1464) started to immediately make in order to continue the Crusade project where his predecessor, Pope Pius II, had left it. Meanwhile, Skanderbeg passed into offensive against the Ottoman armies in Ohrid, where Turkish troops suffered major damage, and where Sultan, infuriated from loss, discharged Sheremet Bey from office.

By mid-May of 1466, a campaign of the Turkish armies was launched against Albania, headed by Sultan Mehmed II himself, which in historiography is commonly known as the Second Siege of Kruja. Faced with such a very difficult situation, with a very large army and without any financial and material assistance from abroad, Skanderbeg was forced to engage his ambassador Paulus Angelus, who on July 7, sent notice to the Senate that resistance in defense of Kruja was going on and at the same time demanded that *Siniora* implement the agreement of 20 August 1463: deployment of military forces and financial aid. In search of help, Skanderbeg appealed personally in late August to Naples and Rome. Since no readiness was expected from Ferrante (Ferdinand of Naples), Rome remained the only hope to which Skanderbeg could appeal to ensure at least financial aid.

In this regard, Skanderbeg would very soon meet Paul II himself. When Skanderbeg arrived in Rome on December 12, 1466, the figure of the Albanian warrior-king arouse hope on a part of the older cardinals, who were still living with the idea of the Crusade. The magnificent reception accorded to him in Rome, surprised even the ambassadors of Milan, who from their impressions of the first day in Rome, would write "*the Pope had made great honors to him by bringing to greet him all the families of cardinals, his own family, and many prelates and other courtiers ... all of us, ambassadors, were invited in honor*

and accompany"; then the fact that Skanderbeg "understands and speaks Italian like each of us and that he has an entourage of about 50 Albanian knights ...".³⁹ Such a reception organized by Paul II, was typically one accorded only to special authorities. Skanderbeg went to Naples and Rome, as a statesman, to whom Europe had obligations. On 24 December, that is on Christmas Eve, while Skanderbeg was invited to the *St. Peter's* Cathedral among the highest clergy of Rome and many others, Paul Pope II granted to him a sword and a coat of arms, a symbolic but a special gift: as a sign to fight bravely against the Sultan, calling him "Alexander of the Epirotes".⁴⁰

Pope Paul II, recognizing Skanderbeg's ability and authority, tried to exploit this authority also in favor of his efforts to establish a unity in the Italian domestic politics against the Turkish danger. However, little possibility seemed to come from the Pope to help Skanderbeg, precisely because of the not so good atmosphere of relations between Italian states. In the Roman consistory, which assembled on 7 January, 1467, it was discussed about a donation of 5,000 ducats, which by cardinals was considered to be scarce. Although from his visit to Italy, Skanderbeg did not manage to secure the desired financial amounts (from Naples, Venice and the Holy See), on the eve of returning to his homeland, he succeeded with his own diplomacy, to play a constructive role in Pope's strategy for unity, and also to exert the appropriate pressure on Venice, and above all to create a relationship of understanding and cooperation on the basis of the *Crusade* ideal. Thus, after Eugene IV, Nicholas V, Calixtus III and Pius II, this was the Pope who came fifth in the career of joint European ventures of George Kastrioti.⁴¹

³⁹ Schmitt, *Skënderbeu*, p.393.

⁴⁰ Aurel Palsari, *Skënderbeu, një histori politike*, Tiranë: Instituti i Studimeve Shqiptare "Gjergj Fishta", 2010, p.704.

⁴¹In the service of communist ideology, for the purpose of presenting the Holy See and the Vatican State as an enemy of Albania, the scholar S.Naçi, reports of Scanderbeg with the Holy See present us as reports between a deceiver (Skanderbeg) And a deceiver (Pope), spitting the figure of Skanderbeg himself. This author (S.Naçi), all of

In early April, George Kastrioti, while returning to his homeland through Ragusa, went quickly to Shkodra and Lezha to coordinate plans with Northern Albanian noblemen, among them also with Lek Dukagjini in order to fight together. In a letter of the Venetian procurator *Zakaria Barbaro* addressed to the bishop of Verona, on 10 May, it was cited: "*All those who had previously rebelled against Skanderbeg, now, because of the bad treatment by the Turk, decided to obey to him*".⁴²

On 19 April, the Pope from his part sent to Skanderbeg an amount of 2700 ducats he had promised him while in Rome. A total of 5,000 ducats which had been discussed at the consistory of 13th February, become now full.⁴³

Partially funded by Rome, Naples and Venice, Skanderbeg's successful offensive during April in the siege of Kruja, constitutes a sort of Crusader miniature attack to recover the lost territories of Skanderbeg. Through this offensive, within a few intense weeks (as long as Skanderbeg pledged in Rome), the missing Crusade in Europe was designed in Albania headed by the prominent warrior-king Skanderbeg. After Sultan's third failure in front of Kruja gates, this city of Albania remained as an important place of Christianity in the Balkans. Now the idea of the crusade seemed to be resurging. The Pope Paul II was making efforts to overcome inter-Italian contradictions and together with Skanderbeg to do something.

the Albanian researchers of the 30s of the 20th century (Anton Fishta, Martin Sirdani, Anastas Gegaj and Fan Noli) who had objectively written, based on documents, considered that they had written in a distorted manner. Foreign scholars, especially those of Arbëresh and Italian (*Zef Valentini, Alessandro Serra, Basilio Pandzic, Ignazio Parrino, Sofia Masci, Filippo Millosevich, Gino Sottociesa*, etj) that their studies are mainly based on the documents of the Secret Archives of the Vatican and of Venice, for Albanian communist historiography, these were fascists.. Cfr.: Stavri Naçi, "Mbi marrëdhëniet e Papatit me Gjergj Kastriotin –Skënderbeun", *Konferenca e Dytë e Studimeve Albanologjike (Tiranë, 12-18 janar 1968)* I, Tiranë 1969, pp.53-58; Idem, "Mbi disa shtrembërime në lidhje me marrëdhënjet e Papatit me Skënderbeun gjatë luftës shqiptaro-osmane (1443-1468)", *Studime Historike*, XXII(V) 1 (Tiranë, 1968), pp.159-171.

⁴² Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, appendix, doc.41; Radonić, *Đurađ Kastriot Skenderbeg*, doc.359.

⁴³ A. Bertolotti, "Curiosità storiche ed artistiche", *Archivio storico artistico archeologico e letterario della città e provincia di Roma*, vol.III, Spoleto 1878-79, pp.38-39.

On the other hand, the zealous warrior, Skanderbeg, who had brilliantly cooperated with four consecutive Popes, was showing willingness in every case, with his great military and political experience to take the lead of the defense of Western civilization. However, the sudden death on January 17, 1468, did not allow Skanderbeg's project to further continue.

Yet, the death of the Albanian warrior-king did not cut relationships with the Holy See. Although Pius II did not come in Albania, just because he died, and although Albania fell under the long-lasting and savage rule of the Ottoman rule, the alliance between the Holy See and Albanian people never came to an end. From now on, these relationships would be built under new conditions, under the Ottoman occupation.

Centuries following Skanderbeg's death until the beginning of the Albanian Renaissance era carry a history of ceaseless anti-Turkish wars, encouraged by Christian princes, but always with inspiration, patriotism and support of the Holy See. This is a history that did not go without leaving a great memory on the national consciousness.