

Venice Efforts to Conquer Durrës in the Medieval Age

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Abstract:

Albanian city of Durrës in the medieval period was referred to by the Republic of St. Mark as the gateway to the Balkans and as a possibility to control the old route of Via Aegnatiae. This city, being located at the intersection of the most important trade lines of that time, encouraged the early interest of Venice for its occupation, but the appearance of the Ottomans in Balkan region represented a tough rivalry to the rule of Venice in the Adriatic Sea. With the aim of invading Durrës, Ottomans not only took from Venice an economic centre, they also jeopardized the break of trade routes toward eastern Adriatic coast. It was this situation that led to inevitable intensive engagement of Venice into new events that began taking place in the medieval Arberia (Albania). Prior to facing directly the Ottomans, the Republic of Saint Mark encouraged the resistance of Arber people against breakthrough of the Ottomans, and in quite many occasions supplied them with weapons and even warships. But this support was provided only in such occasions when the coastal regions were endangered by the Ottoman attacks, having Durrës as the centre. Seeing that it was impossible to keep Durrës away from the Ottomans, with the help of local forces but also wanting to put it under full control, Venice took the decisive step to acquire the city through diplomatic means, and it was finally achieved in 1392, keeping it for more than a hundred years under its rule, specifically until 1501 when it was occupied by the Ottomans.

Key words: Venice, Durres, the Medieval Age

Durres as an important economic, political and cultural centre of Eastern Adriatic was always a target of the conquest coming from both, east and west. There is no doubt that any state that ruled Durres had the possibility to penetrate in depth of the Balkans. Seen from this aspect, Venice as a maritime force at the last quarter of fourteenth century attempted to put this important city in the Balkans under its rule. Its hasty efforts to control Durres were initiated also due to the fact that a new power started to emerge in the horizon, the Ottoman Empire which also had its conquering aims towards the south-eastern coast of Adriatic. In such circumstances the military activity of the Republic of Saint Mark towards the Arber city of Durres must be understood well. Another important factor of conquering intentions of Venice towards Durres was the political instability of Arber states and principalities which were fighting against each other and could not gain control over Durres. Based on the historical evidence, the Ottomans began penetrating into southern Arberia territories by the middle of the year 1380.¹ This breakthrough was attributed to a call for help from the despot of Ioannina, Thoma Preljubovic that he addressed to the Ottomans in the war that he had with Albanians. Karl Topia attempted to do almost the same thing in order to resist in the war against Balshaj.² Principality of Balshaj faced severe Ottoman attacks. In one of the battles (Saver, 1385) Balsha II died. Then the principality began to shrink, rapidly losing holdings sequentially, initially the south, which passed under the ownership of Komnena, widow of Balsha II. She started to leave the country to Venetians in compensation to the amount of 7000 gold annually.³ Durres

¹ Burime tregimtare bizantine: Akademia e Shkencave e RPSH, Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë 1975. p. 29.

² Lufta shqiptaro-turke në shek. XV, Burime Osmane, Tiranë 1968, p. 295.

³ L.Malltezi, Qytetet e bregdetit shqiptar gjatë sundemit Venedikas (aspekte te jetës së tyre) (Tirana, 1988), p. 52-53.

along with the Principality of Topia was subject to direct Ottoman attacks at this time. In the attack against Durres, the Ottomans ensured the support of Lords of Lezha, Lek Dukagjini and Pal Dukagjini. As compensation, the Ottomans gave guarantee to them to recognize their power in Lezha.⁴ To cope with the risk from Ottomans, Karl Topia began the orientation towards his old rival, the Republic of Venice. The orientation was well studied.

Ottoman occupation of Durres directly endangered the interests of Venice in Arberia, which were shown since the time when the Crusades IV took place. At that time, Venice failed to establish its base in Arberia. After this moment the Republic of Venice was satisfied with the protection of its interests in Durres and in other coastal points of Arberia. It paid special attention to building and developing relations with civic community of Durres. Through Durres, Venice conducted trade with the interior part of Arberia lands. Venetian merchants, after landing in the port of Durres went with their caravans into inner areas, bringing and withdrawing from there various goods. For Venice, Durres was the most important point in the eastern Adriatic coast. This is evidenced by the presence of the Venetian consular office in Durres, in 1249,⁵ as well as by the presence of a Venetian colony in Durres in the period of the XI-XIV centuries (located in a particular neighbourhood near the sea). Venetians settled in Durres, although not enjoying the status of citizen (*civis*), many rights were recognized to them. They had obtained the resident status (*habitor*) which ensured them freedom and life, property, economic activity etc. in conformity with the relevant obligations defined by the city council. Until the last decades of the XIV century, presence of Venice in Durres and other possessions in Arber lands was completely in the economic field. It was intended to ensure the

⁴ AAI-II, Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia, Coleg Thalotzey L. – Jireček C. – Sufflay E., vol. I-II, Vindobonae 1913-1918 ,dok. nr. 413.

⁵ Histori e popullit Shqiptar I, Tiranë: Toena, 2002, p. 321

main trade routes, sea and land as well as protection of the interests of Venetian citizens. In political viewpoint, Venice role was very limited. This derived from the fact that since the end of the XII century, especially in XIV century The Hungarian Kingdom, a rival of Venice maintained a formal sovereignty in Arberia lands. Hungarian interests in the coastline, from Kuarnaro (Istria) to Durres, were recognised in 1358 and were confirmed by Peace of Turin in 1381.⁶

Durres was located in a key position for Venice. It was located at the intersection of the most important trade lines of the time. But the emergence of the Ottomans in Durres rivalled seriously the rule of Venice in the Adriatic Sea.⁷ Venice trade routes towards the east coast of the Adriatic were at jeopardy of being damaged. It was this situation that led to inevitable intensive engagement of Venice into new events that began taking place in the medieval Arberia lands. To prevent penetration of Ottomans in port cities, Venice tried to apply the policy of strengthening relations with the leaders of the Arberia nobles who controlled the routes that led to the inner part of the land from the coastal Arberia cities. Venice encouraged the resistance of Arber people against breakthrough of the Ottomans, and in quite many occasions supplied them with weapons and even warships. But this support was provided only in such cases when the coastal regions were endangered by the Ottoman attacks, having Durres at the centre. There is plenty of information from this time proving regular relations of many Arber noblemen with the Republic of Venice. Many of Arberia princes were declared Venetian citizens and they were recognized the privileges deriving from this status. Venice until the period that we are discussing, aimed at securing just economic-commercial interests in Durres and beyond. It applied the same policy also in cases when the Albanian leadership

⁶ Ibidem, pg. 322 ; Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria Venedike 1392-1479*, Tiranë 2007, p. 221

⁷ ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 40/164 (159, 163) v; R. 41/140 (129,137).

required settling the cities or provinces under Venetian administration.

In 1350, the⁸ council of the city of Durres requested Venice to take the city under its administration, ⁹an offer which was not accepted. This is because Venice considered possession of Durres to be temporary, because they could be involved in conflict with other interested powers such as Kingdom of Naples, Serbia and Hungary. For Venice, a concerning situation was created after the battle of Fushe Kosova, 1389, when the Ottoman armies had opened their path toward coastal Arberia lands. After this moment, Venice intensively worked on setting control over the main coastal centres, with the aim to prevent access to the Ottoman forces to the coast. After the battle of Savra (1385), Karl Topia, seeing the risk by the Ottomans, on 1st of June 1386 sent the bishop of Skampa proposing the government of Venice to give them the city of Durres.¹⁰ The talks led by Nicolo Foscari, began in August of the above mentioned year. Available sources speak of a disregard of Karl's offer by Venice. The following year negotiations for transfer of the city ran down. Despite this situation, Venice promised Karl assistance against the Ottomans and at the same time considered Karl and other Arber (Albanian) princes as "friends of the Republic".¹¹ The condition of Durres ruler deteriorates further when he falls seriously ill in 1388. At this moment in time, Venetian Consul addressed the councils of Arber leadership that were running the city in order to hand over Durres, which was threatened directly by the Ottomans.¹² The establishment of Venice in Albanian coast was also favoured by leadership of the country. A considerable part of it, being powerless to face attacks of Ottomans, proved to be ready to

⁸ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria Venedike 1392 – 1479*. Tiranë 2007. p 221

⁹ *Histori e popullit Shqiptar* Tiranë 2002, p. 322

¹⁰ Bernard Doumerc, *Adriatiku nga shekulli XIII në shekullin XVIII*, në: *Historia e Adriatikut*, Tiranë 2005, p.235.

¹¹pounds. *Ibid*

¹²pounds. Bernard Doumerc, *Adriatiku nga shekulli XIII në shekullin XVIII*, në: *Historia e Adriatikut*, Tiranë 2005, p.235.

transfer their administration partly or entirely under Venice, against some conditions, often unfavourable for them. So Ottoman efforts to invade Durres and aggravated situations Karl Topia was going through were used by the Republic of Venice to put the city of Durres under their ownership, as well as other cities (primarily on the coast). In 1388 Venice took the tower of Durres on the coast¹³ and in March 1392 took the fortress of Durres.¹⁴

According to the document AD II.1480, we learn that Gjergj Topia the Lord of Durres, handed Saracen Dandolo, the Castle of Durres to the Captain General of the Gulf, circa 1 April of the year 1392. Transfer deed foresaw the obligation of the Venetians to respect the statutes of the city.¹⁵ On 18 April of the mentioned year, Venice appointed its first castle holder in Durres, Pal Canali.¹⁶ In August of this year, an agreement was reached between Gjergj Topia (successor of Karl) and Venetian captain of the fleet of Adriatic, S. Dandolo.¹⁷ The agreement also marked de jure fall of Durres in the hands of Venetians. The agreement was signed at the castle of Durres. Present were the archbishop of Durres, Johan and other witnesses.¹⁸ According to the agreement Gjergj Topia left the castle to Venice and after his death, the city would be transferred to Venice. At the same time his servants and trusted people had the right to enter the city without any hindrance. The two parties agreed to respect the statutes and regulations of the city.¹⁹ Venice, according to the agreement, undertook to submit Gjergj Topia all his opponents seeking refuge in the castle and would make efforts to reconcile them with the other opponents outside the city. On 26 October

¹³ M.Šufflay, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Tiranë 1926, p. 66.

¹⁴ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Acta Albaniae veneta –tomus II, Përkhthyer nga Henrik Lacaj, A.I.H..VI.68. f.8.; Bernard Doumerc, Adriatiku nga shekulli XIII në shekullin XVIII...*, p. 235.

¹⁶ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid*,p.54

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

1392,²⁰ Gjergj Topia sick for years dies. After his death, Republic of Venice focused its attention on organization of its power in Durres. In this year (1392), Captain Inklet raised on the city's fortress the flag of St. Mark.²¹ This captain belonged to Arber ethnicity. Measures were taken long earlier by captain of the bay of Durres. He had appointed as rector and as temporary governor the Venetian Marin Kauku.²² As of 26 October 1392, Mikel Kontareno and Pjeter Kuirino joined him, who were then jointly called temporary "rectors and governors" of the city until nominating a definitive governor, who was expected to come soon.²³

The temporary governors had the competence to take all necessary measures to ensure the normal functioning of the Venetian rule in the city. For this purpose on 14 November they received detailed instructions.²⁴ On 3 January 1393,²⁵ Bajl Kapedani was appointed rector of the city, of castles and of all places belonging to the port of Durres, by the Great Council of State. At the same time with him was also appointed the respective chamber member.²⁶ Its governance would continue for a two-year period. He would govern according to statutes and rules of the city of Durres. Only in absence thereof they would use statutes and rules of Venice.²⁷ The chamber member was competent to publish the revenues of "the city, castles belonging to the town". He, along with his writer, had the duty to maintain the accounts of revenues and expenditures that were ordered for spending by Bajl Kapedani. Results were forwarded to Bajl Kapedan and he would send them in Venice.²⁸

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Arbëria e Venedikut...*, p. 61.

²² ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 42/87 (86)-88 (87).

²³ ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 42/84 (83); *Qytetet e bregdetit...*p. 55.

²⁴ ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 42/87 (86)-88 (87).

²⁵ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 55.; Bernard Doumerc, *Adriatiku nga shekulli XIII në shekullin XVIII, në: Historia e Adriatikut, Tiranë 2005*, p. 235.

²⁶ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 55.

²⁷ ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 42/93 (92) rv.

²⁸ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 55.

Venice saw it necessary to appoint one admiral (admiraleum) for the city,²⁹ on 27 January 1393.³⁰ Despite the Ottoman conquest throughout the Balkans, Venice managed to keep the city of Durres under its umbrella until 1501.

²⁹ ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 42/96 (95).

³⁰ L.Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit...*, p. 55.