

Albanians between the Western and Eastern Church during the 11th -15th Centuries: Religious and Political Affiliations

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Abstract:

This study aims to shed light into the ecclesiastical position of Albanians and their religious and political links and orientations. The position of Illyrian – Albanian territories between East (Constantinople) and West (Rome) made them encounter many political, cultural and economical challenges throughout Middle Ages. The division marked through the Line of Theodosius, which geopolitically continued with the division of the church in the year of 1054 to be further divided during the Fourth Crusade (1204), affected the Albanian territories as well. Politically, they represented the border between Byzantine Empire and the Latin influence, while religiously they represented the zone between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The Byzantine Eastern Rite Church, headed by Durres Archdiocese, dominated until the 11th century, which gathered around itself 15 Episcopal seats; on the other hand, with the division of the church in 1054, there were still ecclesiastical centers in the Albanian territories which continued their communication with Rome to come on the surface towards the end of 11th century under the archdioceses of Tivar (Antibar), which became the promoter of the catholic rite during 13th-15th centuries, especially in the Northern Albania, Zeta (Doclea), day Kosova. These territories were under the attack of Serbian Orthodox Church and Serb rulers. Despite these religious movements, the Albanians territories continued to face a

religious catholic-orthodox symbiosis, without any collision among Albanian population.

Key words: Albanians, Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, 11th-15th centuries, Rome, Papacy, Constantinople, Arbëria, Zeta, Kosova, Durres, Tivar.

INTRODUCTION

The object of this study, deals with one of the most important political, cultural and religious problematics pertaining to Albanian territories during the Medieval period. The study aims to analyze the Christian position of Albanians and their relations with their respective religious and political affiliations.

Albania constitutes a geographical unit,¹ albeit one with two faces: one looks towards the sea and the other towards the mountains. The leading cities of the Adriatic on the Balkan side, apart from Ragusa (Dubrovnik), are all situated in territories that were part of Medieval Albania: Shkodra (Scutari), Durrës (Dyrrachium) and Vlora (Aulona) were starting points of the famous Via Egnatia, “*the unique road built by the Romans from sea to sea*”.² Particularly Durres constitutes the starting point of a major pathway between West and East, along which the beating pulse of this main vein of communication could be felt strongly during the Middle Ages.³

The religious affiliations towards either the Western or Eastern Church, along with the religious structural organization in Albanian territories came as a result of specific

¹ ÇABEJ, Eqrem. *Shqipëria midis Lindjes dhe Perëndimit*. Tiranë: MÇM, 1994, p. 8.

² *L'Albania: Nozioni Geografiche Statistico-Amministrative*. Scutari: Tipografia dell' "Immacolata", 1911, p. 52.

³ JIREČEK, Konstantin. "Die Lage und Vergangenheit der Stadt Durazzo in Albanien". *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen* I. München und Leipzig, 1916, p. 160.

historical and cultural circumstances present in these territories throughout Medieval times. The historical analysis of the administrative and religious arrangement throughout the 11th-15th centuries, and even prior to that period, it becomes evident to us that the religious affiliations of the local inhabitants did not at all times represent their religious sentiments. Often times, the answer to the question of which Church they would adhere to, was a product of their current political position and a representation of their political aspirations. As such, we assume that a reasonable explanation to this phenomenon is precisely related to the geographical position of Albanian territories, in which they were situated in-between the most prominent religious and political centers at the time, namely between Constantinople and Rome, causing thus an intertwining of political, cultural and religious interests. Albanian medieval territories were situated precisely on the borders of the political influence of the Byzantine Empire and the Roman Empire, meaning thus that the territories were incorporated within the religious influence of both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. Holding a position of such importance often times meant that gaining the support of medieval Albanians was of particular interest to both Empires.

Practicing a particular set of Christian rites as required by either Church, had its own ethnic and political implications. As such, the rites practiced by medieval Albanians were in many cases a survival strategy adopted in lieu with the reigning Empire at the time. We assume that such has been the case with medieval Albanians who practiced the rites of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and that Catholicism, on the other hand, represented a national religion for medieval Albanians. Similarly, it should be taken into account that the conversion to Catholicism was often times considered by the Albanian nobility as a means to establish relations with the western powers. On the other hand, Catholicism in Albania did not

come about as a result of its geographical proximity to the *Holy See*, but rather that presenting Catholicism to Albania was within the intentions and interests of the Holy See in the attempts to expand Catholicism.

The frequent conversions of the Albanian medieval nobility, as a result of their political interests rather than religious sentiments, often times portrayed them as “*unstable*” in this regard. However, it is believed that precisely this sort of religious diversity contributed in a peaceful inter-religious cohabitation and the overall development of religious tolerance in these territories.

Political and religious positions

As far as the geographical position of Albanian medieval territories is concerned, it is evident that they were established in-between the political influence of both Rome and Constantinople, and that until the 8th century the Church of Illyricum was under the administration of Rome through the vicar of Thessaloniki.⁴ After the division of the Roman Empire in 395, the Albanian territories were incorporated within the administration of the Eastern Empire. Even though at a period when religious institutions were equated with state institutions, the religious adherence of medieval Albanians, as evidenced by an abundance of correspondence between Illyrian archbishops, appears to have been gravitating towards the western Church. A loyalty of this nature towards the Church of Rome was also evidenced in 535, when Emperor Justinian annexed provinces of *Dardania* and *Praevalis* to *Justiniana Prima*, despite the emergence of schismatic divisions within

⁴ DUCHESNE, Louis. “L’Illyricum ecclesiastique”. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* vol. I, 1892, p. 543; LEMERLE, Paul. *Philippe et la Macédoine orientale à l’époque chrétienne et Byzantine*. Paris: E. de Boccard, 1945, pp. 242-243; OSTROGORSKI, George. *Historia e Perandorisë Bizantine*. Tiranë: Dituria, 1997, pp. 32-33.

Illyrian archbishops.⁵ The rivalry between Rome and Constantinople eventually led to dogmatic divisions between the Church, resulting to the schism of *Photius* and eventually leading to the great schism of 1054,⁶ and finally the division of 1204.⁷ The first provinces from the Illyrian territories that were adjoined to Constantinople were New Epirus, namely the Archbishopric of Durrës (Dyrrachium, Durazzo). In fact, it wouldn't be until the 8th century, during the reign of the Emperor *Leo III the Isaurian* (732-733),⁸ when the iconoclastic crisis occurred, that New Epirus, Prevalis and southern Italy would be included within the borders of Constantinople.

The religious transformations that occurred in Illyrian-Albanian territories during the 6th-10th centuries were developing parallel to political transformations that occurred in the region during the same period.

The influence and power of the Church of Constantinople was therefore growing parallel to the political and administrative power that the Byzantine Empire was enjoying. This phenomenon became even more apparent with the increase of political and administrative power that the Theme of Durrës was experiencing, which in turn also had an

⁵ *Corpus juris civilis*. Novellae, ed. R. Schoell, Berolini, 1895, (Novellae XI), p. 94; ZEILLER, Jacques. *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire Romaine* (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome. fasc. 112). Paris: E. de Boccard, 1918, pp. 387-388.

⁶ *Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia*, college Tholloczy, L.- Jiriček, C. -Sufflay, E., vol.I. Vindobonae: Holzhausen, 1913, doc. 126; ŠUFFLAY, Milan. "Die Kirchenzustände im vortürkischen Albanien. Die orthodoxe Durchbruchszone im katholischen Damme", *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen* vol.I. München und Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1916, p. 199.

⁷ SOLOVIEV, Alexandre V. "Eine Urkunde des Panhypersebastos Demetrios, Megas Archon von Albanien", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, bd.34, 2 (1934), pp. 304-310; DUCCELLIER, Alein. "L'Arbanon et les Albanais au XIe siècle". *L'Albanie entre Byzance et Venise, Xème-XVème siècles*. London: Speclum, 1987, (kap.IV), p. 367.

⁸ HERGENRÖTHER, Joseph. *Photius, patriarch von Constantinopel. Sein leben, seine schriften und das griechische schisma*. Vol. I, Regensburg, G.J. Manz, 1867-69, pp. 236-237; GRUMEL, Venance. "L'annexion de l'illyricum oriental de la Sicile et de la Calabre au Patriarcat de Constantinople". *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1952, no. 40, p. 191.

influence on the juridical expansion of the Church of Durrës over the Illyrian-Albanian bishoprics and archbishoprics. The Theme of Durrës expanded its dominance so greatly, that by the 10th century it extended its influence over Tivar (Antibar, Bar) and Vlorë, incorporating thusly a number of 15 bishoprics within its authority (suffragans).⁹ The 10th century represents a period that is marked as the pinnacle of influence that the Church of Constantinople enjoyed in medieval Albanian lands, an authority that would later be replaced with the Church of Rome.

It becomes evident that from the 10th century and thereafter, the position of the Eastern Church in medieval Albanian lands took a rather defensive position. This observation becomes even more apparent when we take under consideration that at the same period the Eastern Church had to fight against the increasing Latin influence on the north, as well as against the expansion of the Bulgarian Church in the region of the Metropolitan See of Ohrid. The 11th and 12th centuries were rather tumultuous, when in 1020 in attempts to improve relations with the occupied Bulgarians, Basil II (*Emp. Bulgar.*) accepted the conjointment of southern Orthodox bishoprics which were under the administration of Ohrid, while at the same time the influence of Tivar and Ragusa steadily increased through the upcoming centuries in Northern Albania. From this period on, the evidence suggest of the existence of a Church which even though was under the Byzantine

⁹ “...θρόνος τεσσαρακοστος δευτερος Δυρράχιον μητρόπολις: ό Στεφαναχών, ό Χονοβιας, ό Κροών, ό Ελισσου, ό Διοκλειας, ό Σκοδρών, ό Δριβάστου, ό Πολαθων, ό Γλαβινίτζας ητοι Ακροκεραυνιας, ό Αύλωνιας, ό Λυκνινιδων, ό Αντιβαρεως, ό Τζρενικιον, ό Πολυχεροπόλεως, ό Γραδιζιον”, PARTHEY, Gustav Friedrich Constantin (ed.). *Hieroclis synecdemus et notitiae Graecae episcopatum: accedunt Nili Doxapatrui Notitia patriarchatum et locorum nomina immutata*, Berolini: In aedibus Friderici Nicolai, 1866, pp.124-125, 220-221; *Acta Albania*. Vol. I, (Prolegomena) p.IV; DARROUZES, Jean. *Notitiae episcopatum ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae: texte critique, introduction et notes I* (Geographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire Byzantin, Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, Publications de l'Institut Français d'Études Byzantines.). Paris: Inst. Français d'Études Byzantines, 1981, pp. 309-399.

regulation, maintained Roman traditions, as documented in northern Albania, Prevalis (Doclea/Zeta) and Dardania. In relation to this, the establishment of a Bishopric seat of the Roman Catholic Church in Tivar in 1066-1067,¹⁰ marked an important period of the strengthening and expansion of the Catholic Church in medieval Albanian lands. This came about as a result of the political transformations occurring in the region, particularly considering that the province of Prevalis with the cities of Shkodër, Drisht, Danjë, Shas, Tivar and Ulcin were politically separated from the Byzantine Empire, thusly in an attempt to distance themselves from the Byzantine and Slavic influence, their rulers fastened their ties with Rome.¹¹ It would be precisely in Tivar where the center of Roman Catholicism would be established, extending thus the Roman influence in medieval Albanian lands which would later serve as a barrier, or rather guardians, of Catholicism in regions where the Slavic Orthodox Church had already infiltrated.

During the same period in the region of *Durrës - Arbër*, a similar process of separation from Byzantine was occurring, that is both in a political and religious sense. Whereas during the 11th century, the formation of the Byzantine Theme of Durrës (θέμα Δυρραχίου, was a Byzantine military-civilian province) was heavily influenced by the local element, in different conditions and circumstances, it was precisely the local element that influenced the separation from the Byzantine Empire. The process of “*disintegration*” of the Empire brought forth the first signs of new concepts of “*nationality*” and “*religion*”, which concepts were no longer determined by political or religious entities, but rather concepts that were

¹⁰ FERMENDŽIN, Eusebius. *Acta Bosnae potissimum ecclesiastica cum insertis editorum documentorum regestis: ab anno 925 usque ad annum 1752* (MSHSM XXIII). Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1892, doc. 6; *Acta Albaniae* I, doc. 63; MARKOVIĆ, Ivan. *Dukljansko-Barska Metropolija*. Zagreb: Tisak A. Scholza, 1902, pp. 26-32; GRUBER, Dane. “O dukljansko-barskoj i dubrovačkoj nadbiskupiji do polovice XII stoljeća”, *Vjesnik Zemaljskog Arkiva*, 1912/13, no.1-5/14, pp. 37-38.

¹¹ *Acta Albaniae* I, doc. 63.

differentiated through linguistic and religious ties.¹² Albanians (Αλβανου) are mentioned as such for the first time by the Byzantine historian M. Attaleiates, who was a participant in the uprisings of 1043 and 1078, which revolts partially occurred in Albanian territories. In relation to this event, Attaleiates expressed his surprise that Albanians, which up until that point had been equal citizens of the Empire and more so shared the same religious affiliations with the Byzantines, were bizarrely transformed into their enemies.¹³ As far as their religious identity is concerned, Attaleiates clarifies that the conversion to Catholicism of Albanians was in the process of being a finished deed.

Albanians in the Middle Ages

Documenting medieval Albanians as *arbëror* signaled their religious differentiation from the Byzantines. As such *Albanians*, or *Arbanians*, the inhabitants of *Albanon*, *Arbanon*, were not Byzantine citizens, nor followers of the Orthodox Church, neither *romaios* as evidenced by the medieval chroniclers and officials. As such, a new name emerged for this ethnic group – namely *albanoi* – an appellation which was attached to the Catholic members of the group who inhabited

¹² ΤΑΡΚΟΒΑ-ΖΑΙΜΟΒΑ, Vasilka. “L’idée byzantine de l’unité du monde et l’État Bulgare”, *Résumés des Communications-ler Congrès International d’Études du Sud-Est Européen*. Sofia 1966, p. 228.

¹³ “Η πρώτη αναφορά σε Αλβανούς” αλλά και “Αρβανίτες” γίνεται αναφορικά με γεγονότα γύρω στα 1043 από τον Μιχαήλ Αταλειάτη, όπου αναφέρεται σε Αλβανούς “σελ. 9 “...και οί ποτε σύμμαχοι και της ισοπολιτείας ήμίν συμμετέχοντες, ως και αύτης της θρησκείας, Αλβανοί και Λατίνοι όσοι μετά την έσπεριαν Ρώμην τοίς Ιταλικοίς πλησιάζουσι μέρεσι...”, και “σελ. 18“...ό προμνημονευθείς Γεώργιος, ό Μανιάκης επώνυμον, έκ της Ιταλικής άρχής επαναστάς μετά των εκείσε συνόντων στρατιωτών Ρωμαίων και Αλβανών, διά παρόρασιν του βασιλέως άναθεις και προηγησαμένας έχθρας μετ' αυτού δεδιώς...” αλλά και σε Αρβανίτες “σελ. 297 “...είχε γάρ και Ρωμαίων πολλών στρατιωτικόν, Βουλγάρων τε και Αρβανιτών, και οικείους ύπασιπιστάς ούκ όλίγους...”. Cfr.: ΑΤΤΑΛΕΙΟΤΑΕ, Michaelis. *Historia*. recognavit Immanuel Bekkerus, ed Bonnæ 1853, pp. 9, 18, 297; XHUFU, Pëllumb. “La “debizantinizzazione” dell’ Arbanon”, *The Medieval Albanians*. Athena: The National Hellenic Research Foundation Centre for Byzantine Research, 1998, p. 60.

the area of Arbanon and its surrounding, whereas other Orthodox inhabitants of Albanian territories continued to be identified according to their religious affiliations such as: *romaioi, bulgaroi, skllavinoi*.¹⁴

Religion played a major role in shaping the identity of medieval Albanians, but it also influenced their political and cultural affiliations, which observations are mostly attested by the fact that territories in northern and central Albania were closely tied with the West. One of these regions that were within the authority of the Catholic Church, was the region of Arbanon. In 1166 Arbanon had one archbishop, namely *Lazarus* of Arbër (*Lazarus episcopus Arbanensis*), whose coronation was carefully prepared by Pope Alexander III, who in the same year reserved a special privilege for bishop Lazarus (Lazri) by allowing him to ordain one of the three altars of the Church of Saint Tryphon in Kotor.¹⁵ This bishopric seems to have had a special importance for the Pope, seeing that he appointed a special status to it by connecting it directly with the Holy See. Rome would further advance the expansion of its presence in Arbanon, when by the 13th century, Prince Dhimitër of Arbanon decided to ordain Roman clergy in Arbanon in 1208. This significant moment in history of Arbanon was not coincidental, but rather signified a moment where Arbanon made a political separation from Byzantine, by aligning itself with the West.

By the 12th century, the Catholic Church had already expanded its influence insofar as Durrës, a place which up until that point was known as a bastion of Orthodox Christianity. This is clearly evidenced through a letter sent by Pope Alexander III on the 3rd of January 1168 to “*abbots and other latins, to clergy and seculars alike who reside in Durrës*”, in which he urged the people to support his delegate, the

¹⁴ FRASHËRI, Kristo. “Trojet e shqiptarëve në shek.XV”, *Studime për epokën e Skënderbeut*, vol. I. Tiranë: ASHRPS Shqipërisë, Instituti i Historisë, 1989, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Acta Albaniae* I, doc. 43 and 93.

Archbishop of Ragusa, Tribun, rather than the Orthodox Archbishop of Durrës, Mihail. These initiatives imply that Durrës must have had regular correspondence with the Holy See in Rome, as also evidenced by the fact that in December of 1200, Pope Innocent III appointed an archdeacon in Durrës.

The Albanian nobility also played an important role in establishing relations with Rome, particularly so after the Fourth Crusade in 1204 initiated by Pope Innocent III which was followed by the fall of Byzantine, an event that marked a period when the nobility experienced a twofold emancipation, both a political and a religious one. Such was the case with the noble Albanian family Skuraj who, as gathered by an inscription in 1201, biased towards Rome in a religious, cultural as well as political sense.¹⁶

It can be argued that the establishment of relations and codependence with either the East or the West was a result of historical and cultural conditions in which the inhabitants of these territories found themselves in during the earlier centuries.

Seeing that religious conversions were directly related and often times developed parallel to political transformations, it can be assumed that such religious transformations were not at all times conclusive. The established relations with Rome came to a halt after 1210, when the Despotate of Arta was created, at which juncture the rulers of the Despotate vested relations with the Orthodox world. Years later when the Anjous took hold of Durrës, the status of Catholicism in these areas was once again strengthened. In this regard, the Dominican and Franciscan clergy played an important part in establishing what once were tarnished relations with Rome. However, the frequent variations between the Dominican and Franciscan Order, a phenomenon observed even by foreign travelers, made it difficult for religious followers to adjust to the appropriate

¹⁶ XHUFİ, Pëllumb. "Skurajt e Arbërit", *Studime Historike*, 1991, no. 2, pp.103-105, 107.

rites. This phenomenon, however, paved the way for a dual coexistence and at times a fuse of the Catholic and Orthodox rites. As such, there were times when the rites of the two were so utterly mingled, that it became difficult to distinguish the one from the other. This phenomenon was also observed and chronicled by an anonymous traveler of the early 14th century, who described the inhabitants of medieval Albania as neither *latin* nor *schismatic* (nec sunt pure catholici, nec sunt pure scismatici).¹⁷

The Regnum Albaniae and Holy See: Catholic identity

Establishing and maintaining the Catholic practice in Albanian lands during the 13th and 14th centuries is greatly attributed to the Albanian aristocracy. This period coincides with a time when the Holy See aimed to reestablish its authority in the western Balkans, particularly after the refoundation of Byzantine in 1261, as well as at a time when Charl Anjou I was planning on building a universal Roman-Byzantine empire once he'd manage to conquer Constantinople. This period also coincides with a time when the Albanian aristocracy was facing a serious threat from the expansion of Serbian feudal lords, which threat they believed could be overcome only by allying with the Catholic Anjous whom they considered to be a superior ally in relation to the Byzantine Empire, which alliance they coronated in 1272 when the Anjous established the political formation known as *Regnum Albaniae*.¹⁸ In establishing a firm position in the Balkans, the Holy See considered the Albanian territories to be of particular importance. In this sense, the Holy See had continuously supported the Albanians and often times prompted and even used them to incite Crusades against

¹⁷ *Anonymi descriptio Europae Orientalis: Imperium Constantinopolitanum, Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ruthenia, Ungaria, Polonia, Bohemia*” anno MCCCVIII exarata. Edidit, praefatione et adnotationibus instruxit Olgierd Górka, Cracoviae: Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum, 1916, p. 28.

¹⁸ *Acta Albaniae* I, doc.451; KIESEWETTER, Andreas. “I Principi di Taranto e la Grecia (1294-1373/83)”, *Archivio Storico Pugliese*, 2001, no.LIV, pp. 61-62.

the heretics and “*schismatics*” of the East. This allegiance came about as a result of the development of a national conscience among medieval Albanians, an identity which was recognized and supported by the Papacy.

Catholicism was one of the main ideologies that was related to the political and religious visions of the Popes of Avignon and those of the local nobility of *Regnum Albaniae* in the XIV century. The *Holy See* considered Catholicism as a means to extend its religious and political power in the Balkans, whereas the local nobility considered it as a political means to establish relations with the West. Supported by both subjects, the Holy See and the local nobility, Catholicism reached its peak in south-eastern Balkans at the half of the 14th century. The number of bishoprics, parishes and clergy grew exponentially, whereas the medieval Albanian lands within *Regnum Albaniae* became a true stronghold of Catholicism against the Orthodox rite. By counting on the role of the local nobility, the Papacy began to establish correspondence with the local rulers by the last quarter of the 14th century. There are numerous medieval Albanian families which are mentioned in the letters of Pope John XXII in 1319, which include Muzaka, Arianiti, Blinishti, Matranga, Jonima, with whom the Pope discussed the waging of Crusades against the rulers of Raška (also known as Rassa and Rascia, alb.: Rasha),¹⁹ who were persecuting Catholics from medieval Albanian territories conquered by Serbian kings. This endeavor established a mutual trust between the Albanian nobility and the Holy See.

The enormous trust that the Pope placed on the Albanian aristocracy was a strong indicator of how the Pope perceived the local aristocracy and the influence it had on the region. A great example of this relationship was the

¹⁹ “*Dilectis filiis, nobilibus viris Mentulo Musatio Comiti Clissanie, Andree Musatio regni Albanie Marescalco, et Theodore Musatio Prothosevastoni, salutem etc.*”, THEINER, Augustin. *Vetera monumenta Historica Hungariam sacram illustrantia. Maximam partem nondum edita ex tabulariis Vaticanis. Tomus primus (1216-1352)*, Romae: Typis Vaticanis, 1859, doc. 1264.

appointment of the Bishop of Kruja, Andrea, as a missionary in representing the Pope in an anti-Serbian movement in Albanian territories.²⁰

On the other hand, the Catholic Church maintained its influence in Doclea/Zeta throughout the centuries, and its authority remained firm even during the Church clashes (863, 1054), and furthermore its influence remained strong even when the territory was under the occupation of the Serbian Kingdom and was facing the potential expansion of the Autocephalous Serbian Church (1219). Even at those times, the dioceses of southern Dalmatia and northern Albania remained a strong pillar for the Papacy in its battle against the influence of the Slavic Orthodox Church in the Balkans during the Ottoman period.

The political factor and religion in Zeta and Kosova during Middle Ages

The region of Doclea (Zeta) located in the northwestern region of northern Albania was inhabited by a majority of Albanians descendent from Illyrians, as well as what was a remainder of a population with roman origins, who throughout the centuries had inhabited parts of medieval Albania. In this region, the first Slavic colonization had not left any traces in its community life. Even *Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus*, did not include Dioclea within these territories where the Emperor *Heraclius* (610-641)²¹ had approved the establishment of Slavs. The Illyrian-Albanian continuity of Dioclea is proved by a series of various elements, including those economic (similarities between the status of Budua, Tivari, Ulcin and Shkodër), social (the phenomenon of blood feud), cultural and religious (early

²⁰ *Acta Albaniae* I, doc. 648 (in note); JIREČEK, Konstantin. *Geschichte der Serben*, Bd. 1 Bis 1371 (Allgemeine Staatengeschichte. 1. abt.: Geschichte der Europäischen Staaten). Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1911, p. 352.

²¹ "Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio", *Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus Emperor of the East*, Gy Moravcsik. Washington DC, 2006, pp. 153-154.

Christianity and its relation to Rome), which elements speak of similarities between regions of northern Albania and cities of modern day Montenegro. Even after the conquest of Doclea (Zeta) from Stephen Nemanja in 1198, Doclea was considered a unit in itself under the patronage of the heir of the French Queen Helena, the wife of Stephen Urosh I. According to sources, the territories south of Kotor, including Tivar, Ulcin, Podgorica, Shkodër, Drisht, Shas etc., were all considered Albanian lands.²²

Regarding the structural matters of the Church during the 10th-11th centuries in these territories, it is known that they were included within the authority of the church of Tivar, which eventhough was declared an archbishopric in 1077, it was denied the right to become a metropolis but was instead placed under the authority of Ragusa. For more than half a century, the Albanian bishoprics fought to separate from the dependence of Ragusa, conflicting thus not only with the Ragusans but also with the Pope himself. The situation altered in 1199 when the metropolitan authority for the bishoprics of northern Albanian lands (modern day Albania) was transferred to the archbishopric of Tivar. As such, jurisdictional matters and the title were all within the authority of Tivar, which resulted from a long feud between Tivar and Ragusa to gain authority over Albanian lands as well, a feud which ended in 1255 known as the process of Napoli (Perugia) in favor of Tivar.²³ During this period, all the bishoprics situated in

²² “*Jer Zeta i Sjeverna Albania tvore jedan jepini biološki facies: nerazdruživo povezane su one jednakom plastikom tla, istom ilirskom krolju, istim historijskim bolima*”, ŠUFFLAY, Milan. *Srbi i Arbanasi: njihova simbioza u srednjem vijeku*, sa predgov. St. Stanojevića (Biblioteka arhiva za arbanasku starinu, jezik i etnologiju. Istor. serija 1.). Beograd: Sem. za arban. filolog. 1925, p. 52; XHUFU, Pëllumb. *Dilemat e Arbërit (një studim mbi Shqipërinë e shek.XI-XVI)*. Tiranë: Pegi, 2006, p. 37.

²³ *Acta Albaniae* I, doc.236, 267; *Illyricum Sacrum* VII, 43. Cfr.: СТАНОЈЕВИЋ, Борба за самосталност католичке цркве у немањинској држави, (Volume 13 of Посебна издања: Друштвени и историски списи), Београд: Српска краљевска академија, 1912, p. 155; FINE, *The Late*

northern Albania were *suffragans* of the Archbishopric of Tivar, which included: Ulcin, Shurdhah, Shas, Shkodër, Sapa, Danja, Balec, Drisht, Pult, Prizren and Arbër.²⁴

The Serbian expansion towards coastal lands of Adriatic was strongly supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which from 1219 had its own archbishopric independent from the Ohrid Archbishopric. The reinforcement of the Serbian Church was followed by a series of political and religious measures intended to impose Serbian-Slavic Orthodox Christianity on the inhabitants of Zeta. Orthodoxy extended in medieval Zeta during the 13th century, in what was a predominantly Catholic land. Its influence increased steadily from 13th -14th centuries, especially through the founding of various Orthodox monasteries that were provided with various gifts from Serbian rulers. Orthodoxy therefore spread due to favors completed towards the Orthodox clergy and the church, and on the other hand by persecuting the Catholic clergy and confiscating their properties and riches, while also prohibiting the ordaining of young Catholic priests in vacant positions.²⁵

The repressive measures undertaken by Serbian rulers through their political and religious authority instigated the Albanian nobility in Zeta and northern Albania to organize a resistance against these actions. In this instance, we recall that the uprising of 1319 against Urosh II Milutin was organized within a short period, which came about precisely as a result of these harsh repressions against Catholics. The arduous situation in which medieval Catholic Albanians found themselves in Zeta and northern Albania, continued even during the reign of Milutin's successors, and particularly so during the reign of Tsar Stephen Dushan (1331-1355), whose reign also caused an uprising of the nobility and clergy in Zeta

Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 46.

²⁴ ŠUFFLAY, Milan. "Kirchenzustände", p.218.

²⁵ MURZAKU, Thoma; MULLAI, Abaz. *Historia e Ballkanit: nga antikiteti i vonë deri në shek. XVII*, Tiranë 2005, pp. 97-98.

against the denial of their religious and political rights (meaning so their traditional rights). It is why when Stephen Dushan came to power he was faced with the Albanian uprising of Zeta under the command of Dhimitër Suma.²⁶

As such, the authority of Tivar encompassed a region where the Slavic influence of the Autocephalous Serbian Church organized by Saint Sava (after 1219) was amplifying. It is unsurprising therefore that Tivar served mostly as a guardian of Catholicism by appointing trusted people in the main positions of the Church, such as the case of *Johannes de Plano Carpini*²⁷ or *Guillelmus Adae*²⁸. Its duty was to first end the conflict between the Catholic churches (Bar and Ragusa) and secondly to protect the Catholic Church from the influence and expansion of the Slavic Orthodox Church. Through the help of the Holy See, Tivar was recognized as a western stronghold against the Slavs, a similar position which would later be appointed to Albania in regards to Slavic Orthodoxy in the Balkans.

The position of Albanians and their church would soon improve after the death of Dushan, in a period when these territories were ruled by an Albanian noble family, namely that of Balshaj. The successes of Balshaj towards their political emancipation and establishment of an independent rule were strongly supported by the local inhabitants, which harboured hostile feelings towards the Serbian rulers and their cruel administration. To best adapt to the newly emerged circumstances, Balshaj decided to alter their religious rite by converting a year later (1369) to Catholicism. This act marked

²⁶ БОЖИЋ, Иван. “Албанија и Арбанаси у XIII, XIV и XV веку”. *Глас САНУ*, Одељење историјских наука, књг. CCCXXXVIII, Београд 1983, р. 37.

²⁷ FABIANICH, Donato. *Storia dei frati minori dai primordi della loro istituzione in Dalmazia e Bossina*. Kap.II, p. 48; SIRDANI, Martin. *Françeskanët në Shqypni*, p. 17; ŠUFFLAY, *Srbi i Arbanasi*, p. 90.

²⁸ BROCARDUS, “Directorium ad passagium faciendum”, Ch. Kohler, *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, Documents Armeniens* II. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1906, pp. 365-517 .

an important stride for the internal and foreign policies of this principality. Balshaj also adapted to the ethnic and cultural environment, which was inhabited by Albanians who mostly followed the Catholic rite. Another differentiation that Balshaj were aiming to make is that by converting to Catholicism they also marked a strong dissimilarity with the neighboring Serbian-Orthodox principalities. In foreign matters, the conversion to the Catholic rite opened the way to forming new alliances and connections with the Catholic powers of the west.

The province of Dardania, similar to Illyrian territories, is a territory where Christianity was embraced quite early on in the first few centuries after Christ. This has been evidenced through a presence of an organized Church hierarchy and the existence of bishoprics and ecumenical and provincial councils assembled during Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval period. Regarding the ecclesiastical organization, Dardania was under Metropolitan of Scupi, later Justiniana Prima.²⁹

The enforcement and consolidation of an existing hierarchy of the Dardanian Church, is reflected by the conflicts between Rome and Constantinople, where the popes of Rome in their attempts to reinforce the influence of the Church were seeking the support of the metropolises and bishoprics of the Dardanian Church. In this context, the hierarchy of the Dardanian Church played an important role in claiming a position against the jurisdiction of Constantinople, representing thus a region within the Latin cultural influence and where the Latin language was spoken.

Even though Justinian was a Byzantine Emperor, he had insisted that churches within Illyrian territories were to be incorporated under the authority of the Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima, under the jurisdiction of the Roman Papacy. Throughout the centuries, the territories that are now modern

²⁹ MIRDITA, Zef. "Gjashtë shekujt e parë të krishtenizimit në trevat iliro-shqiptare". *Krishterimi ndër shqiptarë (Simposium ndërkombëtar, Tiranë 16-19 nëntor 1999)*. Shkodër: Ipeshkvia e Shkodrës, 2000, pp. 49-50.

day Kosova and Macedonia had fallen under the rule of Bulgarian and Byzantine rulers, a series of events which reflected on the church and the cultural life of the locals. For a long period, the territory of Dardania was under the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, up until the 10th century where it is mentioned once again as being part of the Shkup bishopric “*Thronos Skupion*”.³⁰

It is of significant importance to note that throughout the Slavic invasion, Christianity became an important identity factor for the local populace, who differed from the newcomers not only by language but by religion as well.

Created and enforced by the Bulgarian tsars, The Archbishopric of Ohrid managed to include within its jurisdiction a number of Albanian bishoprics, including the bishopric of Nish, Prizren, Shkup, etc.³¹

Under the political administration of the Theme of Shkupi and under the religious jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Ohrid (and after the destruction of the state of Samuil by Basil II in 1019), Byzantine Orthodoxy experienced a great expansion in these areas. This is best exemplified through the presence of “*Greek*” (Orthodox) clergy who served as bishops in Prizren and Lipjan throughout the XI and XII centuries, at the same time when Skopje had been transformed into a mostly Byzantine city.³²

The period when the Dardanian-Macedonian Church was oriented towards Byzantine coincides with the Great Schism of 1054, a period characterized by the clash of the Churches of Constantinople and Rome. In such circumstances, it was the Church of Ohrid which was trusted as a bastion of Byzantine against Rome.

³⁰ ИВАНОВ, Йордан. *Български старини из Македония*. София: БАН Наука и изкуство, 1931(reprint 1970) 1931, p. 57.

³¹ СЪБГАРОВ, Иванъ. *История на Охридската архиепископия-патриаршия*. Том.1-2, София: Кооп. печ. “Гутенбергъ”, 1924, pp. 54-59.

³² ŠUFFLAY. “Kirchenzustände”, p. 198.

Despite all of these events, it is evident that the practice of Catholicism in these areas had not ceased. Although these territories were under the political administration of Byzantine, the existence (1019-1020³³) only two bishops in the region of Dardania by the end of the Bulgarian reign, namely one in the north and the other one located in the south by *Sharri* Mountains (Scardus), indicates that the number of followers of the Eastern rite must have been minimal. Such evidence reveals to us that the majority of the population remained faithful to the traditions of the Western rite. However, from the XI century and onwards religious relations between the medieval kingdom of Rascia and the Holy See were impaired, which we can assume that resulted from the continuous expansion of the Eastern rite through the invasion of Bulgarians, Byzantines, and later on the invasion of the region by the Serbian rulers.

The relations with the Holy See were strongly influenced by the political movements occurring in those areas. This is best observed when after the Fourth Crusade (1204) the territories of modern day Kosova that were under the Bulgarian reign of Tsar Kaloyan continued to be within the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. It is at the same time when Catholic bishoprics reemerge in Prizren, Nish and Shkup.³⁴ However, the situation changed for the worse for the Catholic Church and Albanians inhabiting these areas after the formation of the Autocephalous Serbian Church in 1219. It is precisely during the same period when Prizren was conquered

³³СНЪГАРОВЪ. *История на Охридската*, pp. 54-56; GELZER, Heinrich. "Üngedruckte und wenig bekannte Bistümerverzeichnisse der orientalischen Kirche", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* II, (Leipzig 1893), pp. 42-43; *Acta Albaniae* I, doc. 58; НОВАКОВИЋ, Стојан. "Охридска архиепископија у почетку XI века", *Глас СКА*, LXXVI (1908), pp. 46-51; *Грџци извори за българската история: fontes graeci historiae bulgaricae*. Том VI. Издание на Българската Академия на Науките. София 1965, pp. 40-47.

³⁴ THEINER, Augustin. *Vetera monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium Historiam Illustrantia* (Maximam partem nondum edita ex tabulariis Vaticanis): tomus primus, 1198-1549. Romae 1863, doc. 45.

by the Nemanjic Dynasty, when Catholic churches were being ordained to Orthodox ones.³⁵ These events coincide with a time when the Catholic bishoprics of Kosova were obliterated from historical sources only to reappear once again later. Their reappearance in historical sources occurred when the Catholic Church of Rome initiated its endeavor against the Independent Serbian Orthodox Church. In this pursuit, the Catholic Archbishopric of Tivar played an important role, through which the Papacy strengthened the influence of the Catholic Church in Albanian lands. As a result of this initiative, the Catholic bishoprics in Kosova reappear as evidenced by their mentioning in a letters of Pope Benedict XI (1303)³⁶ and those of Clement VI (1346)³⁷, specifically the bishoprics and parishes of Trepça, Graçanica, Prizreni, Shkupi, Novoberda, Janjeva etc. That the Catholic community was present in these territories is also evidenced through the *Code of Stephen Dushan*, in which local Catholics are referred to as those of the “*latin religion*”, “*latin believers*”, “*nonbelievers*” and “*heretic latins*”, a colloquial which clearly illustrates the hostile stance of the Serbian Kingdom against the local Catholics.

The same rejection was also done to the Catholic rite. Under the supremacy of Tsar Dushan, whose *Code* called the Catholic rite the “*Latin heresy*”, the good relations between the local Catholic population and the Serbs came to an end. *The Code of Stephen Dushan* was promoted for the first time in the same Shkupi in May 1349 and it contained harsh statutes against the “*Latin heresy*”, against the conversion of Serbians by Latin clerics and against mixed marriages between “*half believers*” and “*Christians*” (i.e.an Orthodox). If a “*Christian*” should adopt “*the azymite rite*”, he was to be exhorted to return

³⁵ “...tamen nonnulli Reges Rassie, predecessores tui, monasteria, ecclesias, insulas ac villas predictas suis temporibus occuparunt, et tu nunc ea occupas et detines occupata...”, THEINER, *Monumenta Slavorum* I, doc.280; Idem, *Monumenta Hungaricam* I, dok.1061.

³⁶ Ibid.,doc. 649

³⁷ Idem, *Monumenta Slavorum* I, doc.280.

to “Christianity”.³⁸ In this situation the good relations between the papacy and Catholic Albanians became quite tight.

The Catholics in medieval Serbian kingdom were mostly Albanians from Zeta, Kosova, Macedonia and other regions from modern day northern Albania, who represented the people who “practiced the Catholic religion and where the Roman rite was being preserved”. It is why in these regions bordering Albanian-Slavic lands, being a Catholic meant that one was also *arbëror* (medieval Albanian), an opinion which was supported even by Pjetër Bogdani, who said that “as an *antonomasia* the Slavs would refer to the Catholic faith as *arbanaška vera*”,³⁹ meaning thus the religion of Albanians.

When these territories were finally conquered in the 13th century, the headquarters of the Serbian Church was transferred from Zhicha (where it was once positioned) to Peja.⁴⁰ After it gained its autocephalous status, the Serbian Church served as a warfare organization which used its authority to enforce the Serbian occupation in Albanian lands. The religious and royal political ambitions of the Serbs were to replace the role of the Church of Constantinople in these regions. It is precisely why during the first few days after the occupation (1198), the Serbs paid particular importance to the ordainment of local Albanian Catholic churches into Slavic Orthodox churches. It is for this precise reason why the headquarters of the Serbian Orthodox Church was transferred to Peja. Some Albanian cities would even serve as temporary

³⁸ НОВАКОВИЋ, Стојан. *Законик Стефана Душана Цара Српског 1349. и 1354.* Београд 1898, pp. 11, 153-155, 192, 195; СОЛОВЈЕВ, Александар Васиљевич. *Законик цара Стефана Душана 1349. и 1354. године*, Извори српског права 6. Београд: Српска Академија Наука и Уметности, 1988, pp. 3, 174, 176-177.

³⁹ BOGDANI, Pjetër. *Cvnevs Prophetarum de Christo Salvatore Mvndi, et eivs Evangelica Veritate; italice, et epirotice contexta; Et in duas Partes divisa a Petro Bogdano macedone Pars prima*, Patavii MDCLXXXV, [fl.IV].

⁴⁰ JIREЌEK, Konstantin. *Историја Срба I*, Београд: Књижарница Геце Кона, 1922, p.246. note. 3; MALCOLM, Noel. *Kosova: një histori e shkurtër*. Prishtinë-Tiranë: Koha ditore, 2001, pp. 47, 51

headquarters to Serbian rulers and feudal lords, who through cultural, economic and social impositions attempted to rule over the Catholic population who up to that point had managed to deflect the Byzantine influence. Most Catholic churches, as well as Byzantine ones who served as temples to the local Albanians, were usurped and transformed into Orthodox churches of the *Pravoslav rite* (a rite solely followed by the Orthodox Slavs). The same policies were followed in altering local names of places into Slavic ones, as well as imposing Slavic names on the local inhabitants. There is a plenitude of evidence in church registers, as well as later on in Ottoman cadastral registers, which suggest that the local Albanian population had undergone a process of slavization of traditional onomastics.

It is therefore unsurprising that such aggressive policies orchestrated and supported by Serbian kings left many traces in the local Albanian population, which appear evident particularly in the slavized antroponyms that have become known to us through various acts from the courts of Serbian kings directed to the monastery of Hilandar, Deçan, Graçanicë, Archangels (Mëhill and Gabriel) in Prizren etc. Even in these acts the presence of a local Albanian population throughout the Medieval period is evident.

CONCLUSION

Albania's particular geographical position, at the place where the two worlds of East and West both embraced and clashed, provided the backdrop against which were played out ecclesial phenomena such as apostasies, conversions, proselytism and heresies. Medieval Albania also became the place where Christianity was perceived in two different ways, the western (Roman-Catholic) way, and the eastern (Byzantine-Orthodox) one. The divide between these two perceptions had a clear politico-cultural background. It matured in the form of a dogmatic separation long ago. In the 9th century, it exploded for

the first time with the so-called "Photian schism", and in 1054 it climaxed in the great and conclusive schism which continues to divide the Christian world even today.

While politically it pertained to the Eastern Empire, the Church of the Illyrian prefecture was attached to Rome on the administrative-juridical plane, even if not on the dogmatic one. Letters of the first popes give evidence of their close relations with the metropolises of Doclea, Dyrrachium and Nikopolis. The emperor of Illyrian origin, Justinian (527-565), strengthened the relations of the Albanian metropolitan sees with Rome.

Bishops of Albanian dioceses had the opportunity to express their position in the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople concerning hegemonies in the Balkans during the so-called "Acacian schism" (484-519). On that occasion the bishops of Dardania, Praevalitana and Epirus Vetus firmly took the side of the Pope. The strengthening of the Patriarchate of Constantinople at the expense of the Church of Rome also brought about the strengthening of the position of the Church of Dyrrachium in the framework of the Albanian dioceses. This situation is confirmed for us by the Notitiae of Leo VI and by Jan Cimishi. In the 11th century the Byzantine chronicler Mihail Ataliati declared that the Arberi professed a common religion together with the Byzantines.

In the 12th century, Tivar became the principal seed-ground from whence Roman Catholicism expanded into other Albanian areas which until that time had been predominantly Orthodox. This is conspicuously verified in the case of Kosova, where the Serbian invasion of 1198 discovered a sizeable Catholic community. In all events, the political factor continued to be inconsistent. A Byzantine revival after 1281 under the hegemony of the Serbian of the tzar Stephen Dushan sufficed to fan the embers of Orthodoxy into flame again.

Although Illyrian-Albanian territories were situated between East and West (according to Emperor Theodosius

model) and they were ruled time after time, they could never change their ethno-cultural structure, crystallized during the centuries of Albanian nation.