

Catholicism and Religious Symbiosis on the Facade of the Southeast Adriatic: the Case of Shkodra During the Kingdom of the Nemanjić Dynasty

(in the end of XIII century - first half of XIV century)

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Abstract

Despite being under Serbian rule, it should be noted that, during the beginning of the late Middle Ages, Shkodra developed as an important center of autonomous civic commune with a legislation, economy and institutions developed according to the model of the most advanced cities of the Eastern Adriatic, also preserved Roman Christianity. Under the guise of defending Catholicism from the French queen of medieval Serbia around the middle of the 13th century, Helena, explicitly explains the reason that a good part of the Albanian civic municipalities of the Southeast Adriatic coast, such as Bar, Ulcinj and Shkodra, with an overwhelming population of the Catholic rite, to enjoy the status of autonomy, namely, of their self-government and municipal self-organization, but at the same time respecting the sovereign right of the Serbian royal crown. The prerogatives, rights and civil liberties of these communes would be preserved and respected by almost all the sovereigns of the Nemanjić dynasty, as a political and religious strategy inherited and followed by the force of the previous tradition until the end of their rule in Albanian areas.

The development of the civic life of Shkodra in the first half of the XIV century was closely related with the role and the activity of religion and religious institutions. The church, through her educated officers, was an important support for the education of the citizens and also for the managerial interests of the municipality. An important and sublime action for the psychology and religious feelings of the citizens of Shkodra was the veneration of the patron of the city, Saint Stefan, of other saints and also of the calendar of Christian holidays. Their veneration showed the importance and the irreplaceable place of religion in the civic life of Shkodra and also the important position of the church and the catholic clergy in that period. The role of religion and ecclesiastical institutions had a special importance and a big influence in the organization of the society of the city of Shkodra during the first half of the XIV century.

Keywords: Catholicism, commune, statute, papacy, church, saint.

1. Introduction

The greatest stabilizing force in Europe during the Middle Ages was the Church. The Middle Ages are often referred to as the Age of Christianity. This has a broader meaning than can be thought of in modern times; the attention of the people living at that time was oriented towards a religious goal - "salvation of the soul" - and the Church was considered the great arbiter of the fate of mankind. With

the authority emanating from its spiritual and vital service, the Church ensured the control and centralization of European life. All people were born, lived and died under her protection. The church was the center of social, political, economic and of course religious life for the city. The most important events of a person's life took place in or around the Church. Feasts accompanied by baptisms, weddings, and other celebrations were held in the churchyard; men and women confessed to the city priests and received, usually for Easter and Christmas, the blessing of the Eucharist. As in all of Mediterranean Europe and the Italo-Dalmatian area, the role of the faith and ecclesiastical institutions had a special importance and considerable influence in the organization of society in the city of Shkodra, the capital of Northwestern Albania during the late Middle Ages.

Despite being under Serbian rule during the late thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth century, it should be noted that Shkodra develops as an important center of autonomous civic commune with a legislation, economy and institutions developed according to the model of more advanced cities of the facade of the Southeast Adriatic, while also preserving Roman Christianity. Apart from the blows suffered under the rule of Stefan Dušan by the Albanian social and political structures, his power was not exercised everywhere and not always in the same way and in the same way (**Xhufi.P.2006.p.286**). The diploma of the Serbian king for the city of Kruja in 1343, is more of a ritual confirmation of the privileges previously granted to this city by the Byzantine and Anjouan sovereigns, through which they sought to gain the favors of generosity of the Albanian clergy (**Thallóczy.L.&Jireček.C.2004.p.71**). They were by no means proof of their power over them. Dušan's authority did not seem stronger even in the neighboring southern province of Berat (Shkumbin - Vjosa area), which at this time (1358) appears for the first time under the name "despots", and where since the early '50 - whole provinces of the despotate, including Berat, were separated from the Slavic despotate of the Bulgarian royal family of the Asenids by the Albanian nobles (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae II.2002.document no.127; Xhufi.P.2006 p.287**). Dušan's power did not seem to be more consolidated in the southern province of Epirus, where as early as 1350 the Serbian tsar passed this province to the Republic of Venice, nor in Thessaly, where the Albanian population was known to be an important component at that time (**Xhufi.P.2006.p.287**).

All the historical facts testify to the fact that even in the conditions of coercion and oppression imposed by Stefan Dušan, his power could not be installed and exercised equally everywhere. There remained more or less free enclaves represented primarily by mountainous areas, as well as autonomous cities with a predominantly Catholic population, from where it was easier to organize resistance. The problem of the Serbian state's relations with the Albanian Catholics became a really sharp and disturbing problem, especially since it found strong resonance in Catholic Europe. The papacy, the Anjouans of Naples or Hungary, the Slavic Catholic principalities of Bohemia, Croatia, etc., sought to use the movements of the Albanian Catholics of the Kingdom of Serbia to create internal difficulties for the latter (**Xhufi.P.2006.p.282**). The resistance of the Albanian Catholics on the one hand, and the internationalization and tuning of their issue with the European coalition on the other hand, have forced the Serbian kings to adapt to unfavorable situations at certain moments (**Obolensky.D.1974.p.356**). It is worth mentioning the connections of the Serbian Nemanjić with the French Anjouans, which are evidenced there from 1250, when Uroš I (1243 - 1276) married the French princess Helena (**Jireček.C.2010.p.356**). This family connection is constantly referred to in Anjouan documents, as they refer to the Serbian royal couple in terms such as "incliti princeps rex et

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regina Servie, carissimi consanguinei nostri" (honorable king and queen of Serbia, our very dear cousins) (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.520**). Not without purpose, the administration of the Catholic enclaves of the Kingdom of Serbia, in the first place Diocletian (Zeta, Montenegro), was placed under its direct care (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no. 509**). Believer Helena had founded the Franciscan monasteries in front of the gates of Bar and Kotor (**Jireček. C.2010.p.356**). She is proven as a ruler in these parts until 1314, the year of her death, while her sister Maria de Chours, was the ruler of Ulcinj since 1283, when she appears with the title "domina Ulcinii" (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.470; Jireček.C.2010.p.357**). Under the guise of defending Catholicism from the French queen of medieval Serbia, the reason is explicitly explained, that a good part of the Albanian civic municipalities of the Southeast Adriatic coast, such as Bar, Ulcinj and Shkodra, with an overwhelming population of the Catholic rite, to enjoy the status of autonomy, that is, of their self-government and communal self-organization, but at the same time respecting the sovereign right of the Serbian royal crown. The prerogatives, rights and civil liberties of these municipalities would be preserved and respected by almost all the sovereigns of the Nemanjid dynasty, as a political and religious strategy inherited and followed by the force of the previous tradition until the end of their rule in Albanian areas.

2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the role of Western Christianity and religious and Catholic institutions in the life of the medieval urban society of Northwestern Albania.

3. The influence of Catholicism and religious institutions on the social life of Shkodra

In this general context of historical development in the Middle Ages, Western Christianity and ecclesiastical institutions evolved in the civic municipality of Shkodra in the early late Middle Ages. The first mention of Shkodra as an episcopal center in the Middle Ages belongs to the end of the 10th century, in the Notitiae (lists) of the Byzantine emperor John I Tzimiskes (969 - 976) subordinate to Durres; then in the last two decades of the first half of the XI century under the jurisdiction of Dubrovnik, while from 1089 under the Bar, under which it would continue to be until the end of the first decades of the XIV century and more specifically until in 1346 (**Xhufi.P.2000.p.91;Meksi.A.1983.p.80;Mirdita.Z.1998.p.155;Jireček.C.2004.p.117;Buda.I.Zamputi.I. Frashëri.K.Pepo.P.1962.p.111 – 112;Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae II.2002.document no.26**). During Serbian rule, the positions of Catholicism in the Shkodra area would fluctuate constantly. As early as 1308, during the reign of Uroš II, an anonymous traveler (Polish monk), the so-called Anonymous of Gorky, talks about the plight of Catholics in the area of Bar and Shkodra (**Gorka.A.1916.p.31**). Also, the French Archbishop of Bar, the Dominican William of Ada reported in 1332 that the Catholic Albanians of the Northern Territories were eagerly awaiting the organization of a European crusade against the Serbs, which could make available 15 thousand chivalry, strong men and brave warriors (**Buda.A.Zamputi.I.Frashëri.K.Pepo.P.1962.p.111 – 112**).

The impatient reception of a European crusade by the Catholic Albanians of the North is also related to the pronounced fanaticism of the Serbian Orthodoxy, which at this time reached its apogee led by Tsar Stefan Dušan. Referring to Stefan Dušan's Codex, it is noticeable that in addition to the "true

believers" which means the followers of Serbian Orthodoxy, there is also talk of "Latins" or as they are called "unbelievers" (**Novaković.S. 1898. article no.6**). Proponents of "Latin heresy" namely of the Catholic faith should not have been few in number, as Articles 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 clearly show the concern of the state and the Serbian church towards the problem of Catholicism (**Novaković.S.1898.article no. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10**). In the middle of the 14th century, the latter had greatly strengthened its position in the Western Balkans, as a wide belt from Durres to Ragusa, with the dioceses of Kunavia, Stefaniaka, Kruja, Lezha, Shkodra, Drisht, Danja, Shas, Pultit, Shurdhah, Ulcinj and Bar were then associated with the Roman Catholic Church (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.554**).

For the churches of Shkodra in the first decades of the XIV century, the legal book of this city (Statutes of Shkodra) provides some interesting data (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.273**). The oldest monument that appears in the documentation of the time is St. Mary, the church of the Franciscans, which the Serbian queen of French origin, Helena, built in 1288 (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.509**). We also learn that, in 1319 Don Andrea from Shkodra, sends from Ragusa to Shkoder three carpenters to restore the roof of the choirs of the church of St. Stephen (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.646**). This cathedral church is also mentioned in the Statutes of Shkodra, where under its bells the popular assembly was gathered together with the bishop and the most prominent nobles for the election of the high governing bodies of the civic commune (**Statuti di Scutari, 2002, chapter no. 89**). This showed that the institution of the Church in that period went beyond the mission of the religious and spiritual sphere, and with its symbolism played an important role in the cooperation and symbiosis with secular power, a characteristic that for almost all the centuries of the European Middle Ages (**Gatto.L.2006.p.63**).

The ruins of the cathedral church of St. Stephen in Rozafa castle constitute one of the most valuable monuments of medieval Shkodra. They are located near the surrounding walls on the northwest side of the castle. The church consists of the nave, the altar area and the porch on the south side (**Meksi.A.1983.p.80**). The old masonry is built of squared stones bound with mortar and lime. The architects of the Institute of Monuments, starting from the technique of building with squared stone, as a possible construction period for its first phase, think it to be the end of the XIII century and the beginning of the XIV century. From the point of view of architecture, the cathedral of St. Stephen is presented with all the characteristics of the "North School", which belong to the Romanesque-Gothic architecture (**Meksi.A.2004. 183 – 184**).

In addition to the church of St. Stephen, the legal book of the city of Shkodra also mentions the church of St. Peter and St. Angel, in which the grazing of cattle was prohibited (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.77**). In order to preserve and respect the dignity and honor of the Church and of the faith, the statutes provided special provisions, which had to do with the prevention of violence and conflicts in church premises, as well as with the desecration of Christian symbols (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.227,247**). Sacrifices against religious institutions were forbidden and condemned by the entire public of Shkodra civil society, as the latter considered the church as an internal regulator of many aspects of its life. For the two churches mentioned above, with the exception of a tangential information given to us by the statute, there is no other data and no special archaeological and architectural study has been done in connection with them. The fact that the list of saints that was honored and celebrated in the city of Shkodra is very rich, makes us think

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about the existence of other churches with their respective names in the first half of the XIV century. Their traces may have faded and disappeared in later historical periods, whereas is universally known, during the Ottoman rule a considerable number of churches and cathedrals, even magnificent, were transformed and turned into objects of Muslim worship. In the city of Shkodra, one such case was the cathedral church of St. Stephen, which the Turks turned into a mosque immediately after the conquest of the city in 1479 (**Meksi.A.1983. p.80**).

The church was a visible expression of faith and a point of reference and orientation for believers. The church, through its officials educated mainly in Italy and other developed countries of the time, constituted an important support for the minimum education and education of the citizens, as well as for the leading interests of the commune. The bishop of the city of Shkodra served the municipality and the Serbian emperor as his diplomat and envoy to the court of Ragusa (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.751;Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae II.2002.document no.56; Jireček.C.2004.p.117 - 118**). The Catholic bishops of Shkodra were often summoned by Serbian kings and charged by them with important missions, especially near the Pope and the Catholic courts (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.587**).

Such "proofs" of the will and good mood of the Serbian Nemanjić, which nevertheless had to do with the high hierarchy of the Catholic clergy and not with their mass, often aroused illusions in the popes of Rome, who did not hesitate to believe them. It's the role of protector of Catholics in the Kingdom of Serbia (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.583,587**). Even more than once, at the papal headquarters in Rome, hopes were raised for a possible conversion of Serbian kings to the Catholic rite. "(1347), March 2. Avenue: Clemens VI. pope Nicolaum Buchia protovestiarium regni Rassiae hortatur, ut Stephanum regem Rassiae, qui, sicut Marcus episcopus Scutarensis refert, se unire in sinus. Romane ecclesiae desiderat, "ad premissa viis et modis oportunitis" inducat" (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae II.2002.document no.29**).

The Serbian kings themselves did everything to encourage such hopes, keeping close to the high hierarchy of the Albanian Catholic clergy and maintaining good relations with the Pope, the Serbian Nemanjids rightly reckoned to influence and amortize the clash with the masses of Albanian Catholics as well as with rival powers being manipulated by the Papacy (**Xhufi.P.2006.p.284**). So their conciliatory attitudes were inspired by a simple political account.

The bishop of Shkodra played an important and decisive role in the popular assembly, when the highest governors of the municipality were elected. His absence there was considered unusual and was regulated by a special provision. "We order that every year on the day of St. Mark the Angel, an oath be taken for three judges, eight councilors, and two intendants. On that day, the bells of St. Stephen will ring, the people will gather and our bishop will come, who together with four nobles will elect the above officials as well as the judges and councilors. If the bishop is not in the province, three local secular nobles will appear" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.89**). The bishop also had supreme authority in the field of the ecclesiastical judiciary and the documents sealed by him enjoyed legal recognition by the governing bodies of the commune (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no. 154,155**).

Alongside the Church and the clergy were monks and monasteries. The statutes of Shkodra say that all those persons who decided to dedicate themselves only to religious life, after drafting the will and

taking the oath, had to give up any of their movable property (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.194**). Other documentary and bibliographic data show the presence and activity of the Benedictine order and the Franciscan order of beggars in the city of Shkodra, almost at the same time as their appearance and organization by countries of origin (**Meksi.A. 1983.p.94;Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae I.2002.document no.509;Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.273**). This can probably be explained by the geographical proximity of the civic municipality of Shkodra to the Italian Peninsula.

One of the most important monasteries not only in the city of Shkodra, but also in northern Albania, has been that of St. Sergius and Baku on the left bank of the river Buna, from which it takes its name and the present village Shirgj (**Karaiskaj.Gj.1980.p. 286**). During the Middle Ages, the monastery played a major role for the city of Shkodra in the development of trade with the outside world. This Benedictine assembly was of special importance for Shkodra, which was the river harbor and the starting point of the caravan route during the XIII - XIV centuries to the interior of the country (**Mirdita.Z.1998.p.246**). He was also important for the sake of the works that were related to the pier, the market and the customs, and around him were built warehouses, customs offices and houses for trade. There were warehouses, customs, and at least since the 14th century, a fair was organized (**Meksi.A.2004.p.202**).

The legal status of the civic commune of Shkodra did not mean only a certain territory and self-government, but also had to do with the consecration of religious images and symbols. The community of believers could pray to both the Virgin and the local saints. The local saints once lived on earth themselves, so they were able to understand human problems very well. They could serve as helpful mediators between Christ or God. According to the doctrine of the official Church, the center of the Christian life was the Mass, a sign of remembrance and respect for Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Every Sunday as well as on the marked days, the citizens gathered at the mass, thus breaking the tedious work routine. People also demanded to be buried in the church cemetery, where the saints also rested.

A very important, sublime and very impressive action for the psychology and religious feelings of the inhabitants of the municipality was the veneration of the saint or the patron of the city. Undoubtedly, almost all the inhabitants of Shkodra, both citizens and inhabitants of the suburbs, embraced their being within the municipality through the celebration of the city saint, St. Stephen, "nostro Confaloner" (**Schmitt.O.2001.p.129**).

This celebration was a big event in the living year of the citizens of Shkodra. On the eve of the feast of St. Stephen and shortly after its end, foreigners coming to the city of Shkodra had a number of privileges and enjoyed a special legal protection. "With the will of God and our protector St. Stephen, we order that for a period of six days, three days before and three days after his feast, foreigners who come to our city especially for this feast, not to be touched and disturbed. That person who will fall on your neck in our territory or in our possessions, is punished with fifty hyperpers" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.7**).

Relying on the Byzantine model, the cult of St. Stephen, experienced a relatively wide spread in the civic commune of Shkodra. This is due to the fact that in the church of St. Stephen in Constantinople were crowned in the V - VIII centuries the emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire

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(**Norwich.J.1997.p.65**). The glory of this saint quickly penetrated into all the provinces, as far as North Africa, but also in Dalmatia, where many churches dedicated to this saint were built from Shkodra to Ragusa. The people of Shkodra expressed their close connection with this patron by often and willingly giving their sons the name Stefan (**Schmitt.O.2001.p.130**). When the indulgence was given to the Cathedral Church of St. Stephen by Pope Clement VI on January 22, 1347, the news spread rapidly and further increased the glory and power of the saint and with him, the city associated with him (**Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae II.2002.document no.27**). The patron saints of Budva (St. John the Baptist), Bar and Drisht (St. George) as well as the Dalmatian patrons St. Tryphon of Kotor and St. Vlashi of Ragusa enjoyed similar reverence (**Schmitt.O.2001.p.129**).

The veneration of saints in the city of Shkodra has its origins in late Antiquity with an uninterrupted ecclesiastical continuity even in the early Middle Ages. Like the Roman element in the population, in the city of Northwest Albania many cults were preserved as the legacy of the late Roman Empire and of late Antiquity. This area abounded with places, churches and monasteries named after saints, in which until the late Middle Ages the great saints of early Christianity were evoked with glory, most of whom were persecuted and killed at the time of the Roman Empire of the I - IV centuries. This is related to the legend of the Christian martyrs St. Sergius and St. Bacchus, martyred near the castle "Resafa" in Syria in the time of the Roman emperor Maximian Daia (310 - 313). The cult of these two saints is thought to have come from the Syrian environment in Shkodra, through the Illyrian legionaries who served in the Roman army, where the hill of Rozafa castle takes its name from the old name of the castle Resafa (**Ostrogorskiy.G.2002.p.27;Hoxha.G.2000.p.74 - 75**).

The variety of honoring the saints in the city of Shkodra during the first decades of the XIV century is evidenced by the Statutes of Shkodra, which do not only speak of St. Stephen and St. Sergius, but also of St. Peter, St. Angel, St. Andrew, St. Ilina , St. Michael and St. Mark (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.3,7,50,77**). However, all these saints could not eclipse the splendor and majesty of the Mother of God, St. Mary, who was a special saint and was revered through the construction and naming of churches after her, the organization of pilgrimages and the worship of icons (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.113**). In the ecclesiastical calendar of the city of Shkodra, in addition to major holidays such as Christmas, Epiphany (January 6), Easter and Ascension Day (August 15), the statutes clearly document the celebrations of St. Mark (April 25), St. Peter (June 29), St. Elijah (July 20), St. Stephen (both August 2 and December 26), St. Angelo (September 29) and St. Andrew (November 30) (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.3,7,50,77,82,89,113**). In these festivities that were organized in honor of these saints, without the slightest doubt, participated almost all the citizens of Shkodra and the surrounding area. Many aspects of their lives and work were regulated and organized to the rhythm of the saints' celebrations.

Important state, judicial, economic - craft, agricultural and livestock activities were related to these holy and festive days as well as their time interval. "We order that every year on the day of St. Mark the Angel, an oath be taken for three judges, eight councilors, and two intendants" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.89**). "By the will of the king, our citizens who are summoned to court by letter or stamp, are not obliged to appear in the period from the feast of St. Stephen to the feast of St. Sergius. Then they have to show up. They are also not obliged to appear in court until the beginning of the plantings until the feast of St. Stephen's Christmas" (**Statuti di Scutari. 2002.chapter no.3**). "It is forbidden for any judge to adjudicate cases during Christmas, Carnival, Epiphany or on

holidays associated with St. Mary and the Ascension" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.113**). "Concerning the carpenter masters we order from the day of St. Sergius at the end of September onwards to be paid twelve groschen" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.50**). "The custodians of the vineyards must faithfully do their duty from the feast of St. Elijah to the feast of St. Michael. During this time they can prune, open roads, tie branches and set up vine support tents, where they used to be" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.82**). "No one, be it an ordinary person or a shepherd, should graze the cows on the hill between the church of St. Peter, the Holy Angel and down to the rock. This applies to the period from the day of the Ascension to the feast of St. Andrew" (**Statuti di Scutari.2002.chapter no.77**).

4. Conclusion

The veneration of the saints and the calendar of Christian holidays showed the central and irreplaceable place occupied by faith in the circle of civic life, as well as the important position of the church and the Catholic clergy in that period. All these mentioned above, clearly prove that the role of Western Christianity and ecclesiastical institutions had a special importance and significant impact on the organization of Shkodra civil society during the late thirteenth century and the first half of the century XIV.

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