

RELIGIOUS RIVALRIES BETWEEN ROME AND BYZANTIUM AND INFLUENCES IN THE ARBERIAN TERRITORIES

Dr. MUHAMET QERIMI

Professor at the Department of History, University of Prishtina, Republic of Kosova.
E-mail: muhamet.qerimi@uni-pr.edu

ABSTRACT

Emperor Leo III, openly undertaking the battle against the cult of icons, aimed primarily to affirm the power of the central government over the unlimited power of religious institutions as well as over the provinces, especially the peripheral ones, which not accidentally sided with the worshipers of the icon. The iconoclasm met with fierce opposition in the Byzantine provinces of Italy and Illyricum, which were under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Pope. Here, however, the iconoclasm did not fail to win over its supporters. Thus, from two letters that the famous Byzantine theologian, Teodor Studiti, sent in the 820s, to the Archbishop of Durrës, Anton, and another monk from Durrës, Dionysus, it is learned that the iconoclasm was embraced in that diocese by representatives of the regular clergy (monks), who were generally its staunchest opponents? There is no evidence that the war of the icons would have taken in the Albanian territories the harsh forms it had in other parts of the Byzantine Empire. However, in its context, an event of great importance occurred not only for the ecclesiastical developments but also for the political ones in the Albanian territories. The iconoclastic emperor Leo III detached them from the jurisdiction of the Pope of Rome and placed them under the direct subordination of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (732). This step, was accompanied by the creation, at the beginning of the century. IX, of the Byzantine theme of Durrës and that of Nikopoja, greatly influenced the strengthening of the control of the central government in these western provinces of the Empire.

Keywords: Iconoclasm, Emperor Leo III, Arberian territories, Durrës, Rome.

Illyrian-Arber territory located between orthodox east and catholic west was an area where permanent intra-religious rivalries occurred. As a consequence of these developments, people of Arberia divided into two Christian religions, catholic and orthodox, with an absolute dominance of the latter. They became protagonist of these religious events much earlier compared to their newcomer Slavic neighbours, Bulgarians or Serbs who accepted Christianity much later (9th and 10th centuries), when the Arber Christian tradition had gone a long way. Illyrian-Arber population, despite religious rivalries within Christian belief, preserved its ethnic identity. This consolidated Arber identity was preserved in the difficult Post-Byzantine circumstances, when Albanians were involved in the long process of converting to Islam, and when the Albanian religious picture became the most specific among the Balkan peoples.

Illyria, along with Greece and Rome, was among the earliest countries in Europe to embrace Christianity as a social and religious value. The division of the Roman Empire into two parts carried the spirit of division in the ecclesiastical aspect, but with a delay of several centuries. Until the eighth century, the organization of the Christian church in Illyria was directly under the subordination of Rome. This ecclesiastical subordination served as a reason that the terminology of the church in Illyria belongs mainly to the Latin provenience, as can be seen in the expressions mass, communion, priest, saint, baptism, bishop, cross, curse, etc. This fact testifies to the autochthony, presence and contacts of the Arbers with the Latin religious and

cultural world even during the 4-5th centuries, when the Latin language of the church, ceremonies and religious terminology were sanctioned.

If we go back to the origin of Christianity, we can say that we have it present in the Illyrian-Arberian territories since the apostolic time (First century of our era) as an illegal religion. Traces of this presence are found through the activity of St. Paul the Apostle with his companions, who descended to Apollonia to be distributed in Illyricum, Epirus and Macedonia (Popovic 1996: 21; Bavant 2004: 313; Thëngjilli 2002: 13). Thanks to the dedicated and permanent activity of the first Christian communities since the first half of the 4th century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman state. This triumph was not uniform but took place gradually in time and space. Thus, in the coastal area of Illyria, Christianity finally triumphed in the 2-4th century, and in the interior in the 4-6th century (Korkuti 2003: 80). During late antiquity, when barbarian invasions became a threat to the Roman Empire and the ancient culture and civilization, Christianity became an important factor in the resistance of the native population to the barbarian peoples (Korkuti 2003: 80).

During this period, the church structures in Illyria were organized on the basis of the provinces of Dardania, Preval and Epirus, which served as a basis for religious organization. After the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion in the Roman Empire, the first episcopates in Illyria were founded by the emperor Theodosius (Korkuti 81). These episcopates, after the division of the Empire were included in the area of eastern Illyricum, whose ecclesiastical dependence has moved between Rome and Constantinople. The Arber lands served as the dividing line between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, dividing the Arber into members of these two religions. The Illyrian-Arberian territories from 395, when the Roman Empire was divided into two parts and until the 6th century, although politically part of the Byzantine Empire, were religiously mainly related to Rome. Emperor Justinian played an important role in this regard (Frashëri 1964: 30).

Despite quite successful initial organization, the Christian church could not maintain unity for a long time. The first frictions between the church of the east and the church of the west occurred during the "Acacian schism" (484-519) (Cameron 2000: 79). After these initial clashes, the first were the bishops of Durrës who took a proConstantinople stance (Thëngjilli 2002: 13). However, until the Eighth century, Christianity in Arberia formally referred to Rome. But from the first half of the 8th century (year 732 after the decision of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III the Isaurian to separate the eastern and western dioceses) (Reuter 2003: 12) and by the 10th century, Illyrian area (now known as the land of the Arbers) was divided into zones which depended on the Patriarchate of Constantinople (which constituted the absolute majority) and on others (a small part) which depended on Rome (Fraisie-Coue 1998: 175; Korkuti 80). The Eastern or Orthodox rite first spread in the 9th century. (870), but had its greatest spread in the 10th century, when the metropolis of Durres stretched from Bar to Vlora and subordinated 15 episcopal sees: Tivar, Lyknid, Shkodra, Drisht, Dioclea, Pult, Lezha, Kruja, Stefanica, Kunavi, Cërrik. (Durrauzes 1981: 330; Thëngjilli 14). It was this period when the Church of Constantinople reached its culmination in the Arberian territories. In 9th century Latin Church was reaffirmed in Northern Arberia through extreme Dalmatian ramifications

(Della Rocca Tirana: 1994). Among the enclaves that maintained solid links with Rome was the province of Preval in which the cities were established: Shkodër, Drisht, Danjë, Shas, Tivar and Ulqin. The Mati River is thought to have been the dividing line between Byzantium and Rome. This division of that time will be traced and preserved almost throughout the subsequent course of history, even to this day, if we do not count Islam as the religion that came later in these territories.

At the peak of the Byzantine Period, 9th century, “when the Arbers appear for the first time by name in the historical literature, the chronicler M. Ataliati claimed that this people were "co-religious" with the Byzantines (Xhufi 1997: 6). Referring to the 10-11 centuries, Arber lands were under the jurisdiction of three archbishoprics: Naupakt, Durrës and Ohrid. In the rivalry between them it was Ohrid that was gaining more ground. Some episcopates such as Himara, Butrint, Drinopoja, Kozil (near Preveza) and those of Vlora, Glavinica (Ballsh), Cerrik, seceded from the archbishopric of Naupakt and Durres and merged with Ohrid (Anamali 2002: 245). After the first division of Christianity (Fotjus schism of the 9th century) (Xhufi 89) and especially after the great schism of 1054, two ritual areas were delineated in Arberia: The Catholic/Roman area in the north and the Byzantine/Orthodox area in the center and south (Xhufi 9). This great division of the church (east and west) was dictated by historical processes, such as the presence of the Gauls (before the French), the Normans or the Anjouans. Especially in the period 731-1054, but also in the following, from the review of a wide archival documentary base, a periodic competition is noticed between Rome and Constantinople, to have under the influence the dioceses of Illyria/Arberia. The rivalry escalated into bloody battles. In this regard, we should mention the shrinking of the areas that were under the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Durres in favor of the Catholic Church. If we were to refer to the factual data, we would say that in 1143 under the jurisdiction of Durrës there were four suffragans (churches dependent on a higher headquarters) out of the 14 that were before (Anamali 245). A part of them passed under Catholic jurisdiction (the episcopate of Ulcinj, a branch of Bar in 1022) (Shuflai 2001: 182). Thus, there was a growing tendency for secession from the Patriarchate and at the same time for inclusion under Catholic jurisdiction. However, the process of transition from orthodox to Catholic jurisdiction or vice versa was long in time. This is noticed in the application of rites and terminology, which show that in the 6-11th centuries, the churches of Illyricum were closer to the Roman church (Faverial 2004: 44). This is also influenced by the penetration of the Bulgarians in the areas of Arber. It temporarily isolated these spaces for the extension of the Patriarchate, but Orthodox Christianity was preserved by the natives. Moreover, the king of the Bulgarians, Boris in 866 was baptized in the lands of Arber (Church of Ballsh). Bulgarians from pagans became Christians. Boris, after this, realizing the importance of religion in the occupied territories sought to contact the pope of Rome to seek guidance for a proper ecclesiastical administration. Various authors hold that Boris should have addressed Constantinople. But when Boris was baptized in those lands where Christianity had been brought by St. Paul himself (he had preached the Gospel of the peoples of Scythia, Illyria, and Epirus) (Faverial 79) it was natural for him to turn to Rome as the first official capital of Christianity. Constantinople's enmity with the Bulgarian kings continued and reached its peak in 1014 when Samuel was defeated by the Byzantine emperor Basil II. The

latter reorganized the Episcopates of Ohrid, headed by Greek bishops such as Theogilikati in 1100 with the aim of including all of Arberia and southern Italy. Meanwhile the Patriarchate of Rome which called itself the Papacy (French influence) continued, until 1303 to intensify the struggle to gain as many dioceses as possible in Dalmatia and Arber.

This mission was entrusted mainly to the bishops of Ragusa, who took measures against some priests of Ulcinj (1167), and bar (1303) who preached according to the rites of the east church. The landings of the Normans in 1081 and 1105 as well as the development of the first crusade in 1096 caused upheavals for the unification of the Christian church. The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade and its holding for 60 years under French rule, also brought the Benedictine French monks to Arber (1230). They settled first in Shirgj (above Buna) (Shuflai 210) and later in Durres and Shkoder (after 1250) under the protection of Charles Anjou. At the same time (1283) (Shuflai 213) the Order of the Franciscans was established, deepening the process and the return of the Christian Arbers to the old center, Rome. These developments were also supported by the state of Arber in 1208. This is evidenced by the correspondence of Demetrius (prince of Arberia) with Pope Innocent III, where he showed the head of the Catholic Church the decision to enter with his vassals into the bosom of the Catholic Church (Anamali 249). Despite the intense action of the Catholic Church, south of the Durres-Ohrid line, the positions of the Orthodox Church were never endangered. The great Byzantine Orthodox centers operated and worked intensively. Among them should be mentioned the episcopates of Durres, Neupakt and Ohrid. A large number of churches and monasteries (south of the line mentioned) provide ample evidence that sheds light on the great influence of the Byzantine Orthodox Church. Some of the monasteries were administered directly by the patriarch of Constantinople such as the monastery of St. Kolli (in Mesopotam of Delvina), the monastery of Labova e Kryqit (Gjirokastra), the monastery of Hoteahov (Chameria) (Anamali 251). In the Arberian lands that were under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate, the crisis that the Byzantine Empire suffered after the Crusades and its collapse in 1204 was not felt much. This is because all the territories from Durrës to Preveza, were included in the borders of the Despotate of Epirus. This state and ecclesiastical formation was, in a way, an imitation of the Byzantine Empire. In addition, it should be taken into account the fact that most of these territories in the period 1260-1346 were included in the framework of the rebuilt Byzantine Empire (Anamali 249). This strengthened the Orthodox faith. The general side is that the southern Arberian territories and their inhabitants remained associated with the Orthodox rite. Although the lands and population of Arber in 11-15th centuries, involved in two religious affiliations (Orthodox and Catholic), never managed to have the character of intolerance and religious fanaticism. No historical data is found to prove the existence of religious conflicts between Orthodox and Catholic Arbers. Arber lands in the 10-15th centuries were characterized by instability of political and religious nature in the external sense but this was not expressed by the internal Arberian disruption.

After the collapse of the Serbian and Byzantine Empires, Orthodoxy eventually lost its political support. Consequently, Catholicism had the greatest extent. The regions of Pult, Arberia and Kandavia were Catholic, especially the princely families of Topia, Kruja, Kanina, Muzakaj, Shpataj, Zenebisht, Balshaj, Arianit (Zefi 2000: 51). Also, the anthroponymy present in the

registers of Delvina, Ioannina, Vlora of 1583 (Thëngjilli 1981: 177), are evidence of this phenomenon. While the pope and the patriarch fought for hegemony in the Balkans, the Ottoman Turks came to the fore, conquering Ohrid in 1408, Constantinople in 1453, bringing about the overthrow or subjugation of the patriarchate, and bar (a center that depended on Rome) in 1571. The Ottoman occupation found Arberia in three major regions: Catholic in northern Albania, Orthodox in southern Albania, and intermediate in central Albania, where Islam had previously penetrated. The fact that a treaty was signed between Sultan Mehmed II and the new Patriarch of the Patriarchate Gjergj Skelari, in which it was agreed not to demolish churches to make mosques, weddings and funerals to take place in the church and not to disrupt the Easter holiday created advantage that orthodoxy continued to survive in Albanian lands.

CONCLUSION

Finally, in the form of a short summary, we must emphasize the fact that the territory of Illyria as a border area between the Orthodox east and the Catholic west was a space where permanent rivalries within religion took place. As a consequence of these developments, people of Arberia divided into two religions, but preserved their ethnic identity. They were very early protagonists of these religious events and even, in this context, were far ahead of their Slavic neighbors, as is the case with the Bulgarians or Serbs, who converted to Christianity very late (ninth and tenth centuries) at a time when Arberian Christian tradition had come a long way and where awaited another longer path, that of religious conversion to Islam that will make even more specific the religious picture of Albanians like no other in the Balkans. At the time of the reign of Leon III (717-741), the Byzantine Empire was embroiled in a fierce internal religious conflict. At its core lay the different interpretations are given to the role that sacred images (icons) played in the Christian faith. Beginning in the time of Justinian the cult of icons of saints (iconolatria) recognized such a widespread in the Byzantine church that it became one of the main forms of expression of religious feeling. Churches and monasteries at that time were filled with icons of precious and costly saints, becoming at the same time an indicator of the luxury and wealth in which the clergy and religious institutions swam. Such a thing fed the displeasure of a large mass of people of all walks of life, who thought that the church should be, as in the time of the apostles, poor and virtuous. On the other hand, there was no lack in the church itself against the cult of icons, according to which such a cult had nothing to do with Christianity, as a purely spiritual religion. These tendencies were stronger in the eastern provinces of Byzantium, a fertile ground for religious movements, where remnants of Monophysitism continued to survive, and at that time the Pavlikan sect was strengthening and expanding, fighting against every form of a religious cult.

References

1. Anamali. S. 2002. Historia e popullit Shqiptar I, botim I Akademisë së Shkencave të Shqipërisë, vol. I, Tiranë.
2. Bavant. B. 2004., L'Illyricum, dans Le Monde Byzantin I, L'Empire romain d'Orient (330-641), Paris.
3. Cameron. A. 2000. The Cambridge Ancient History, volum XIV, Cambridge.
4. Della Roka. M. 1994. Kombësia dhe feja në Shqipëri, 1920-1944, Tiranë.

5. Durrauzes. J. 1981. NotitiaeEpiscopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae, Paris.
6. Faverial. Zh. 2004. Historia më e vjetër e Shqipërisë, Plejad, Tiranë.
7. Fraisse-Coué. Ch. 1998. L'incompréhensioncroissante entre l'Orient et l'Occident, dans Les Elgisesd'Orient et d'Occident, tome III, Desclée.
8. Frashëri. K. 1964. The History of Albania, Tiranë.
9. Gjini. G. 1992. Ipeshkvia Shkup - Prizreni nëpër shekuj, Ferizaj.
10. Korkuti. M. 2002. Parailirët, Ilirët, Arbëri. Tirana.
11. Korkuti. M. 2003. Parailirët, Ilirët, Arbërit, Tiranë.
12. Popovic. R. 1996. Le christianisme sur le sol de l'Illyricum oriental jusqu'àl'arrivée de slaves, Thessaloniki.
13. Reuter. R. 2003. Shqiptarët në Jugosllavi, Tiranë.
14. Shuflai. M. 2001. Serbët dhe shqiptarët, Tiranë.
15. Thëngjilli. P. 1981. Disa aspekte të kombësisë shqiptare në burimet osmane të shek. XVXVI, në "Studime historike", 1/1981.
16. Thëngjilli. P. 2002. Shqiptarët midis lindjes dhe perëndimit 1506-1839 (Fusha Fetare),Tiranë.
17. Xhufi. P. 1997. Ndjenja fetare në Shqipëri gjatë mesjetës, S.Historike/1-4, Tiranë.
18. Xhufi. P. 2000. Krishterimi roman në Shqipëri në shek VI-XVI, në simpoziumin "Krishterimi ndër shqiptarë", Shkodër.
19. Zefi. Sh. 2000. Islamizimi i shqiptarëve gjatë shekujve, Prizren.