

ALBANIA IN THE 'ANONYMI DESCRIPTIO EUROPAE ORIENTALIS' (1308 A.D.)

Robert Elsie

The Albanians first entered the annals of post-classical recorded history in the second half of the 11th century and it is only at this time that we may speak with any degree of certainty of an Albanian people as we know them today, although their predecessors, no doubt with a strong Illyrian element, seem to have inhabited the same northern Albanian mountains since ancient times. In his 'History' written in 1079-1080, Byzantine historian Michael Attaliates was first to refer to the *Albanoi* as having taken part in a revolt against Constantinople in 1043 and to the *Arbanitai* as subjects of the duke of Dyrrachium.

The period between this eleventh century of initial Crusading fervour, with an awakening interest in the east and the fifteenth century when the first substantial traces of the Albanian language were recorded, was one of evolution, consolidation and migratory expansion for the Albanians. As a people they began to make their mark on history. Any reference to Albania and the Albanians in this period is therefore of crucial significance.

The 'Anonymous Description of Eastern Europe' is a mediaeval Latin text from the year 1308 A.D. containing a survey of the lands of Eastern Europe, in particular, the countries of the Balkans. Its anonymous author is thought to have been a French or French-educated cleric, most likely of the Dominican Order, who was sent by the church to Serbia where he gained much of his information on the Balkans. The text of the *Anonymi Descriptio Europae Orientalis* is contained in several mediaeval codices, among which are Ms. Lat. 5515 and Ms. Lat. 14693 at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Ms. 263 of the library of the City of Poitiers, and Cod. Lat. 66 of the University Library of Leiden. The manuscript was edited in Kraków in 1916 by Olgierd Górka. In addition to sections depicting the various regions of Byzantine Greece, Rascia, Bulgaria, Ruthenia, Hungary, Poland and Bohemia, it contains a section on Albania, one of the rare descriptions of the country in the early years of the fourteenth century. The text reads as follows:

Consequenter dicendum est de Albania, que est coniuncta Grecie immediate a parte meridiei et est sita inter Rasiam et terram despoti. Est enim Albania regio satis lata et magna. Habens homines bellicosos valde, sunt enim optimi sagitarii et lancearii. Quatuor fluviis magnis tota hec regio irrigatur, videlicet Ersenta, Mathia, Scumpino, Epasa. Terra est fertilis in carnibus, caseis et lacte, [in] pane et vino non multum habundant, sufficienter tamen habent presertim nobiles; civitates, castra, fortalicia et villas non habent, sed habitant in papilionibus et semper moventur de loco ad locum per turmas et cognationes suas. Habent tamen unam civitatem, que vocatur Duracium et est Latinorum, ab ea habent pannos et alia necessarija. Partem huius regni cum civitate duracena tenet nunc princeps tarentinus filius regis Sycilie et hoc ex voluntate libera dominorum de terra, qui ipsum propter naturalem amorem, quem habent ad Gallicos, sponte et libere eum in dominum receperunt. De Apulia et de civitate brundensima nocte potest transiri in Duracium et de Duracio per Albaniam potest iri in Greciam et in Constantinopolim valde faciliter et bene absque difficultate viarum et periculo aquarum et hanc viam faciebant antiquitus imperatores romanorum, nam nimium tediosum est exercitum copiosum ducere tanto tempore

per mare et per tam longam viam. Dictum Albanie regnum nunc regem nullum habet, sed terra dividitur per principes terre, qui ipsam regunt et ipsi nulli subsunt. Dicitur autem hec provincia Albania eo quod albo crine homines illius regionis nascuntur. Canes sunt in ea ingentis magnitudinis et tante ferocitatis quod leones perimerunt, unde et Plinius refert, quod Albani miserunt unum canem Alexandro Magno, qui de leone, elephante et tauro in stadio triumphavit. Oculos habent depictos et glaucos in pupilla adeo quod melius de nocte vident quam de die. Duas tamen constat esse Albanias, unam in Asia que est circa Indiam et de illa non loquimur hic, aliam in Europa, que est de imperio constantinopolitano et de hac loquimur hic. Duas provincias continet in se, videlicet Clisaram et Tumurist. Preter has duas provincias habet iuxta se et alias provincias, videlicet Cumaniam, Strophanatum, Polatum, Debre que quidem provincie sunt tributarie eisdem Albanensibus et quasi serve, quia exercent agriculturam et colunt vineas ipsorum ac servant necessaria in domibus suis. Homines istarum provinciarum non moventur de loco ad locum, sicut prefati Albaneses, set habent stabiles mansiones et opida, nec sunt pure catholici, nec pure scismatici. Si tamen esset, qui eis verbum dei proponeret, efficerentur puri catholici, quia naturaliter diligunt Latinos ut dictum est. Habent enim Albani prefati linguam distinctam a Latinis, Grecis et Sclavis ita quod in nullo se inteligunt cum aliis nationibus, et hec de Albania dicta sufficiant.

(Now we come to speak of Albania which, on its southern side, is right next to Greece and is situated between Rascia and the land of the despot¹. Albania is a rather extensive and large region. It has warlike inhabitants indeed, for they make excellent archers and lancers. This whole region is fed by four large rivers: the Erzen, the Mat, the Shkumbin and the Osum². The land is productive in meat, cheese and milk; it is not very abundant in bread and wine, though the nobles in particular have enough. They do not have cities, camps, fortifications and farms, but live rather in tents and are constantly on the move from one place to another with the help of their troops and relatives. They do have one city called Durrës which belongs to the Latins and from which they get textiles and other necessities. The Prince of Tarento, son of the King of Sicily³, now holds sway over part of this kingdom including the city of Durrës. It was the free will of the landowners who, on account of their natural love for the French, spontaneously and freely received him as their lord⁴. From Apulia and the city of Brindisi one may cross over to Durrës in one night, and from Durrës one may travel on through Albania to Greece and to Constantinople much more easily and without all the road difficulties and perils of the sea. The Roman emperors of ancient times used this route⁵ Rome and Constantinople, passing through Durrës, Elbasan and Ohrid. for it is excessively tedious to transport a large army in such a period of time by sea and by such long roads. The said kingdom of Albania now has no king, the land being divided among the landowners who rule it themselves and who are subject to no one else. This province is called Albania because the inhabitants of this region are born with white (*albo*) hair. The dogs here are

¹ i.e. the despot of Epirus.

² *Epasa* no doubt ancient *Apsos*, i. e. the Osum flowing through Berat, tributary of the Seman.

³ Philip, Prince of Tarento.

⁴ cf. Du Cange, Hist. Const. 1. 102.

⁵ Reference is made in the Via Egnatia, the main road of ancient communication between

of a huge size⁶1848, being attacked by "some thirty immense dogs, who pounced out from the most secluded corners and would straightway have breakfasted on me had I not been so aptly rescued; certainly the dogs of Khimara are the most formidable brutes I have ever seen." and are so wild that they kill like lions. As Pliny mentions, the Albanians sent such a dog to Alexander the Great which vanquished lions, elephants and bulls in the stadium. They have painted eyes, greyish in the pupils, such that they can see better at night than in the daytime. There are two Albanias, one in Asia near India of which we are not speaking here, and the other in Europe which is part of the Byzantine Empire and of which we are speaking here. It contains two provinces: Clisara⁷ and Tumurist⁸ speaks of a locality called Tomorista.. In addition to these two provinces, it has other provinces next to it: Cumania⁹Durrës and the Mat region, perhaps in the Ishëm river., Stophanatum¹⁰, Polatum¹¹, and Debre¹² which are provinces tributary to the Albanians and more or less subjected to them, for they are active in farming, tend their vineyards and take care of the necessities of life at home. The inhabitants of these provinces do not move from place to place as the aforementioned Albanians do, but live rather in solid mansions and towns, nor are they entirely Catholic or entirely schismatic. Should anyone preach the word of God to them, they would pretend to be true Catholics, for it is reported that by nature they have a liking for the Latins. The aforementioned Albanians have a language which is distinct from that of the Latins, Greeks and Slavs such that in no way can they communicate with other peoples. This is enough on Albania.)

From the text, it cannot be ascertained whether or not the unnamed author actually had an opportunity to visit Albania himself or had gathered his information on the country from the reports of other clergymen who had been there. We do know that the Dominicans were active in Durrës from 1304 onwards when the town fell to the West after twenty years of Byzantine rule. In a letter dated 31st March, 1304, Pope Benedict XI asked the head of the Dominican Order in Hungary to send to Albania some of his subordinates of 'good moral character, active and eloquent' for missionary activities. With the support of the Holy See, the Dominicans thus had full power to set up a Latin hierarchy of their own liking on the Albanian coast to replace the Orthodox church which had been forced to abandon position. In such a context, one can appreciate the author's allusion to the religious ambivalence of the Albanians, a characteristic they were to retain for centuries (cf. their so-called crypto-Christianity in the later Moslem

⁶ Half a millennium later the English painter and poet Edward Lear (1812-1888) was to make the same discovery on his travels down the Himaran coast in 1848. In his *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Greece and Albania* (London 1851), he records on 22nd October,

⁷ Këlcyra, ancient *Kleisura*, on the upper Vjosa river in southern Albania.

⁸ Probably in the Myzeqe region around Kavaja. The chronicle of Giovanni Musachi

⁹ No doubt Chounavia, formerly the site of an Orthodox diocese, somewhere between

¹⁰ No doubt Stephanatum, a diocese of the time somewhere near Durrës.

¹¹ Pulatum, Polati or Pult near the Drin in northern Albania east of Shkodër.

¹² The present-day region of Dibra or Debar on the Albanian-Yugoslav border north of Lake Ohrid.

period).

Aside from the significance of this section of the ‘Anonymous Description of Eastern Europe’ for the information it provides on economic and political relations, administrative divisions, geographical knowledge, communications, ethnological and religious matters on Albania in the period, it offers the second oldest reference to the existence of the Albanian language, a ‘linguam distinctam.’ This historic reference comes twenty-three years after a text discovered in Dubrovnik¹³ referring to a ‘lingua albanesca’ in 1285, fourteen years before a similar reference in the Itinerary of Simon Fitzsimmons¹⁴ (Symon Semeonis) in 1322, and twenty-four years before the often quoted passage by the Dominican monk Burcard (also known as Brocardus monachus or Frère Brochard)¹⁵ in 1332 in his *Directorium ad passagium faciendum* to a ‘linguam diversam’ and to the use of Latin letters in the books of the Albanians. What light it would throw on this dark age if any such books could be discovered! For the present, however, Latin and Greek texts written by foreigners will continue to constitute our best sources of information on Albania in the Middle Ages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AJETI, Idriz

Contribution à l'étude de l'origine de quelques toponymes du Monténégro. in: Akten des Internationalen Albanologischen Kolloquiums Innsbruck 1972. Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Sonderheft 41, p. 677-687 (Innsbruck 1977); and in: Studije iz istorije albanskog jezika (Prishtina 1982), p. 162-169; Albanian version in: Studime gjuhësore në fushë të shqipes. Vol. 1. (Prishtina 1982), p. 113-119.

DUCELLIER, Alain

La façade maritime de l'Albanie au moyen âge. Durazzo et Valona du XIe au XVe siècle. 701 pp. (Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1981); esp. p. 330.

ELSIE, Robert

Dictionary of Albanian literature. 170 pp. (Greenwood Press, New York 1986).

Two Irish travellers in Albania in 1322 [forthcoming article].

¹³ *Audivi unam vocem clamantem in monte in lingua albanesca* (I heard a voice crying in the mountains in the Albanian language). See Jirecek 1901 & Ajeti 1977, p. 683.

¹⁴ *Albanya est provincia inter Sclavoniam et Romanyam, per se linguam habens* (Albania is a province between Slavonia and Romania, having a language of its own). See Elsie [forthcoming].

¹⁵ *Licet Abanenses aliam omnino linguam a latina habeant et diversam, tamen litteram latinam habent in uso et in omnibus suis libris* (The Albanians indeed have a language quite different from Latin. However, they use Latin letters in all their books). See *Recueil* 1906, p. 484.

GÓRKA, Olgierd (ed.)

Anonymi descriptio Europae orientalis. Imperium Constantinopolitanum, Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ruthenia, Ungaria, Polonia, Bohemia. Anno MCCCVIII exarata. 70 pp. (Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum, Cracoviae 1916).

JIRECEK, Konstantin

Die Romanen in den Städten Dalmatiens während des Mittelalters 1-3. Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil-hist. Kl. (Wien 1901, 1904).

Recueil des Historiens des Croisades. Documents arméniens. Tome second. Documents latins et français relatifs à l'Arménie (Paris 1906).

[first published in *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie*, Berlin, 26.1 (1990), p. 24-28.]