

THE EARLIEST REFERENCES TO THE EXISTENCE OF THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE

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Despite intensive research and impassioned interest on the part of Albanian scholars, the origins of the Albanians as a people remain shrouded in mystery. The crucial second half of the first millennium, i.e. 500-1000 A.D., which might provide the missing link to the Illyrian inhabitants of the region in antiquity, yields virtually no information and linguistic records of the earlier stages of the Albanian language. Such earlier records, which could have served as a reliable guide, are missing. Indeed there are no substantial traces of the Albanian language predating the fifteenth century when the first texts occur: the somewhat mysterious Bellifortis text from 1405 (cf. Elsie 1986), the well-known Baptismal Formula of Paulus Angelus of 1462, a curse from the year 1453 (cf. Braun & Camaj 1972), the so-called Easter Gospel or Pericope which is generally thought to date from the end of the fifteenth century (cf. Borgia 1930), and the short vocabulary of Arnold von Harff, a German pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land who, during a stopover in Durrës in the spring of 1497 (cf. Elsie 1984), recorded twenty-six words, eight phrases and twelve numbers of Albanian.

While the crusades and the resulting Angevin conquest of Albania in 1269 provided the Western world with some information about Albania as a geopolitical region, surprisingly few references are made in works of history and in travel narratives to the Albanians themselves. What is known of the period has been compiled by Alain Ducellier in a series of articles and in his masterful 701-page monograph on the Albanian coastline from the 11th to the 15th centuries (cf. Ducellier 1981, 1987).

Though Byzantine historians, upon whom we must rely for much of our knowledge of the southwestern Balkans in the centuries preceding the above-mentioned texts, have left details of battles, revolts and political changes in this region and elsewhere, they are often strangely silent as to the languages and customs of the non-Greek inhabitants of their peripheral territories, an indifference to the 'barbarians' which is an attitude they may have inherited from the Ancient Greeks.

It is generally assumed that the early Albanian tribes, facilitated by the collapse of the great Bulgarian empire at the end of the 10th century, began expanding from their mountain homeland in the 11th and 12th centuries where they had lived as nomadic shepherds, initially taking full possession of the northern and central Albanian coast and by the 15th century spreading southward towards what is now southern Albania and into western Macedonia. They 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 about 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 of crystallization, to avoid the much more difficult term ethnogenesis, of the Albanian people as we know them today can therefore be set in the 11th and 12th centuries, and any reference to or information about them, and in particular to their language from this period up

to the first recorded texts in Albanian in the 15th century, must be the focus of particular attention.

The earliest references to the existence of the Albanian language per se occur around the beginning of the 14th century. Indeed we have four clear and unequivocal references between 1285 and 1332.

The first of these historic references, that of 1285 (cf. Jirecek 1901, 1904, Ajeti 1977, 1982), occurs not in Albania itself but in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) where a sizeable Albanian community had existed for some time. In the investigation of a robbery in the house of Petro del Volcio of Belena (now Prati), a certain Matthew, son of Mark of Mançe, who appears to have been witness to the crime, states:

”Audivi unam vocem clamantem in monte in lingua albanesca” (I heard a voice crying in the mountains in the Albanian language).

Twenty-three years later, we encounter a description of Albania in the so-called *Anonymi Descriptio Europae Orientalis* (Anonymous Description of Eastern Europe), a mediaeval Latin text from the year 1308 A.D. which contains a survey of the lands of Eastern Europe, in particular, the countries of the Balkans (cf. Elsie 1990). 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 section on Albania ends with the following reference to the Albanian language: ”Habent enim Albani prefati linguam distinctam a Latinis, Grecis et Sclavis ita quod in nullo se inteligunt eum aliis nationibus” (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).

The third reference to the existence of the Albanian language (cf. Elsie 1991) derives from the account of a pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land in 1322. The narratives of pilgrimages to the Holy Land indeed provide a primary source of information for much of the eastern Mediterranean in the first half of the second millennium. Although unlike Arnold von Harff in 1497, most pilgrims showed no more than passing interest in the lands they visited en route to their goal, two Anglo-Irish pilgrims, Simon Semeonis and Hugo Illuminator whom we may refer to in English as Simon Fitzsimmons and Hugh the Illuminator, stopped over in Albania in 1322 on their journey, and the former vividly recorded what he saw. His account gives us a rare glimpse of the Albanian coast in the first half of the 14th century. Simon Fitzsimmons of the Franciscan Order set out from Clonmel in Ireland in the spring of 1322 with his friend and companion Hugh the Illuminator, and travelled through northern Wales to London, Canterbury, Dover, Wissant, Amiens, Paris, Beaune, Lyons, Avignon, Nice, Genoa, Bobbio, Piacenza, Parma, Mantua, Verona and to Venice. There they boarded a merchant vessel for the Holy Land which stopped on its way in Pula, Zadar, Dubrovnik, Ulcinj, Durrës, Corfu, Cephalonia and Crete, before reaching Alexandria. Simon’s travel narrative, known as the *Itinerarium Symonis Semeonis ab Hybernia ad Terram Sanctam*, is now preserved in a manuscript (No. 407) in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, U. K. It was first published in Cambridge in 1778 in a now rare edition by James Nasmith under the title *Itinerarium Symonis Simeonis et Hugonis Illuminatoris ad Terram Sanctam* and has since been edited by Mario Esposito and Eugene

Hoade. The 'Itinerary' contains a wealth of information on matters as varied as customs inspections and procedures, costumes, coinage, raw materials and products of the countries he visited and of course on churches and holy sites. On sailing down the Adriatic coast, Simon notes: "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.). Of the city of Durrës he continues: "Inhabitatur enim Latinis, Grecis, Judeis perfidis, et barbaris Albanensibus" (For it is inhabited by Latins, Greeks, perfidious Jews and barbaric Albanians). It is interestingly enough concerning Dubrovnik (Ragusa) that he refers again to the language of these 'barbarians': "In eadem dominantur Veneti, et ad eam confluunt Sclavi, Barbari, Paterini et alii scismatici negotiatores qui sunt gestu, habitu et lingua Latinis in omnibus difformes" (The Venetians dominate in it [Dubrovnik] and Slavs, Barbarians, Paterines and other schismatic merchants frequent it, who are entirely different from the Latins in their customs, dress and language).

The last of these references to the Albanian language and the first possible reference indeed to the existence of writing in Albanian was made in the year 1332 by a French Dominican monk known as Burcard or Frère Brochard (Lat. Brocardus monachus). In a Latin work entitled *Directorium ad passagium faciendum* (cf. Recueil 1906). Burcard noted: "Licet Albanenses 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). Though the reference to the existence of the language is clear, that to writing in Albanian is ambiguous. It cannot be said for certain whether Burcard meant Albanian-language books written in Latin script or simply books written in Latin. The former possibility has of course captured the imagination of subsequent generations of scholars and the text is often quoted to this end in histories and studies of Albanian literature.

What is the significance of these references? First and foremost, it is apparent that in the period 1285 to 1322 the Albanian language was well-established on the southeastern Adriatic coast so as to be noticeable to foreign observers in coastal ports such as Durrës and Dubrovnik. In its treatment of the province of Albania, the 'Anonymous Description' refers to its population as "warlike inhabitants ... who make excellent archers and lancers ... and who do not have cities, camps, fortifications and farms, but live rather in tents and are constantly on the move from one place to another." The port of Durrës, it is noted, however, "belongs to the Latins." That Albanian must have been widely spoken on the coastal plains and mountain regions at the time can be inferred in particular from Simon Fitzsimmons' initial observation that the province had a language of its own, i. e. Albanian. In his reference to the city of Durrës, however, the 'barbaric Albanians' are mentioned only fourth, after the urban Latins, Greeks and Jews, an indication, in accord with the 'Anonymous Description,' that they had not yet formed the majority group in the city itself.

The dating of these references, all within a period of less than fifty years, should not however be taken as an indication that Albanian or early forms of it were not spoken in the preceding centuries. If the Albanians, as the 'Anonymous Description' tells us were rural nomads, and if their settlements were more concentrated in the highlands than on the coast, it is quite likely that they were simply not taken note of, even though they may have constituted a substantial population group. Even today, there are striking parallels which demonstrate how a substantial ethnic group and linguistic minority in a country can be overlooked. Virtually all references to the ethnic composition of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania today will mention the Greek minority in the Gjirokastra and Saranda regions, a small Macedonian-speaking minority in several villages on Lake Prespa and perhaps a Serbian-speaking minority on the east bank of Lake Shkodra.

The Albanian Encyclopaedic Dictionary (FESH 1985, p. 1042), for instance, gives the following information: "According to the 1979 census, there were 54,687 people of non-Albanian nationality (2.1% of the general population). Of these, 49,307 are Greeks who live principally in the southern border regions in the districts of Gjirokastra and Saranda, 4,163 are Slavs, the majority of whom are Macedonians who live in villages of Prespa."

All such references ignore two other ethnic groups and linguistic minorities in Albania which are nonetheless much larger than the Slavic minorities, and perhaps even than the Greeks. These are the Aromunians (Vlachs), the nomadic shepherding community of southeastern Albania who speak a language related to Romanian, and in particular, the many Gypsies in Albania who speak their own Romani language. Gypsies are indeed to be found virtually everywhere in the country, some nomadic and others now settled to an extent, and can be seen and heard in any street scene in Tirana, for instance, for those who open their eyes and ears. They are not necessarily ignored in references to ethnic composition for any devious political reasons, but simply because of their low social status and their nomadic habits. They are present in the country but simply do not count. One may similarly assume that references to the Albanians and their language in the late Middle Ages are so sparse not because they had not crystallized as a sizeable ethnic group, but because of their low social status and their nomadic habits. It is only when their numbers grew to such an extent such that they could no longer be overlooked that notice was taken of their language in written documents, i. e. in the period between 1285 and 1332 A.D.

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