

The Early History of Albania

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The Land and its People

The Republic of Albania is a small country in southeastern Europe. It is situated on the coast of the Adriatic Sea in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula and borders on Montenegro to the north, Kosovo to the northeast, the Republic of Macedonia to the east, and Greece to the south. To the west of Albania, across the sea, is the southeastern coast of Italy.

Albania currently has a resident population of slightly under three million people, all of whom speak Albanian, an Indo-European language. There are also several, mostly bilingual ethnic minorities, notably of some Greeks in the south of the country, but also small groups of Slavs, Roma and Vlachs. Only about half of the Albanians live within the borders of the Republic of Albania itself. The other half live in the surrounding countries, primarily in Kosovo, which has about two million Albanians, and in Macedonia, which is home to about half a million Albanians. Aside from small Albanian-speaking minorities in southern Italy and Greece who settled there centuries ago, there are now also large emigrant communities who left Albania in the 1990s in search of jobs and a better life. Most of these Albanian emigrants have settled in Greece and Italy, legally or illegally, though Albanian emigrants are now to be found throughout Europe and in many other parts of the globe. In all, there are probably about six to seven million people on earth whose mother tongue is Albanian.

A History of Albania or a History of the Albanians?

Geographically, Albania has always been at the crossroads of empires and civilizations, even though it has often been isolated from the mainstream of European history. For centuries in ancient times, it formed the political, military and cultural border between East and West, i.e., between the Roman Empire of the western Mediterranean including much of the northern Balkans, and the Greek Empire of the eastern Mediterranean including the southern Balkans. In the Middle Ages, Albania was once again a buffer zone, this time between Catholic Italy and the Byzantine Greek Empire. Later, after its definitive conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, it formed a bridgehead between Christian Europe and the Islamic Orient. However, the early history of Albania has little to do with the Albanian people as such.

The Albanians were originally a small transhumant shepherding community in the mountains of the southwestern Balkans and for many centuries they did not play a major role in historical events. Indeed, there is little documentary trace of them before the second millennium A.D. and even later, like the native Indians of North America, they were largely marginalized in their own country. The early urban settlements founded along the coast were initially populated by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and were later inhabited by Venetians, Byzantine Greeks, southern Slavs, Italian traders, and even Jews. It was only in the Ottoman period that Albania really became Albanian in an ethnic sense, and it was first in the twentieth century that the Albanians created an independent state of their own. Thus, for many centuries, the history of Albania had little or nothing to do with the Albanian people. They were but one stone in a great mosaic. In this sense, the history of Albania comprises much more than the history of the Albanians.

Illyria and the Ancient Illyrians

In ancient times, the region of Albania was known as Illyria (Gk. *Ἰλλυρία*, Lat. *Illyricum*). The term Illyria is actually somewhat confusing because it can also refer to a much larger region - virtually the whole of the eastern Adriatic coast, encompassing what is now the territory of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. In his "Roman History," the Greek historian Appian of Alexandria (ca. 90-160 A.D.) states the following of Illyria:

"The Greeks call those people Illyrian who dwell beyond Macedonia and Thrace, from Chaonia and Thesprotia to the river Danube. That is the length of the country, while its breadth is from Macedonia and the mountains of Thrace to Pannonia and the Adriatic and the foothills of the Alps. It is five days' journey in breadth and thirty across, say the Greeks. The Romans measured the country as above six thousand stades in length (750 Roman miles) and about twelve hundred stades (150 Roman miles) in width."¹

The Illyrians (Gk. *Ἰλλυριοί*, Lat. *Illyrii*) were Indo-Europeans of the ancient period, who were made up of various tribes. The term Illyrian probably referred initially to the tribe with which the ancient Greeks first had contact, but it was later used as a collective term for a wide range of tribes in the region, although they may not have been culturally or linguistically homogenous at all. In his encyclopaedic work "Natural History," the Roman author Pliny (23-79 AD) shows that a certain amount of confusion about the Illyrians existed in ancient times, too, when he refers to some of them as *Illyrii proprie dicti* (the Illyrians properly speaking).²

Among the more prominent Illyrian tribes who inhabited territory in and around present-day Albania were:

- the Albani or Albanoi (Gk. *Ἀλβανοί*) who are referred to in the Roman period by the Greek historian Ptolemy (ca. 90 - ca. 168 A.D.) as inhabitants of Epirus Nova, equivalent to central and northern Albania. Interestingly enough, Ptolemy's map of the region includes a settlement called Albanopolis, which has been identified with Zgërdhesh near Kruja;
- the Amantes (Gk. *Ἄμαντες*) who have been identified with the archaeological settlement of Amantia, situated above the Vjosa River in southern Albania, about 30 kilometres east of Vlora;
- the Ardiaei (Gk. *Ἀρδιαῖοι*) who seem to have inhabited the region around the Bay of Kotor, but may also have been farther north in Bosnia. The Greek geographer Strabo (ca. 64 B.C. - ca. 24 A.D.) lists the Ardiaei as one of the three strongest Illyrian tribes, with the Autariatae and the Dardani. The Ardiaei attained substantial power around 230 B.C. under King Agron who was of Ardiaean origin. Their name may be related to the heron (Lat. *ardea*) as a totem symbol.
- the Bylliones (Gk. *Βυλλιώνες*) who have been identified with the archaeological settlement of Byllis near the Vjosa River in the district of Mallakastra.
- the Chelidoni (Gk. *Χελιδόνες*) who seem to have lived somewhere near the valleys of the Drin and Mat rivers. Their name may be related to the swallow (Gk. *χελιδών*) as a totem symbol.
- the Dardani (Gk. *Δαρδάνιοι*) who appear in the fourth century B.C. and are commonly associated with the region of Kosovo and the Drin valley. there is some uncertainty as to whether they were an Illyrian or Thracian tribe;
- the Encheleae (Gk. *Ἐγγέλιοι*), who may have lived around Lake Ohrid and the valley of the upper Drin River. Their name may be related to the eel (Gk. *ἔγγελος*) as a totem symbol;
- the Labeatae (Gk. *Λαβεάται*) who inhabited the region around Shkodra;

¹ Appian of Alexandria, *Illyrike* 1, taken from John Wilkes, *The Illyrians*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. p. 91.

² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 3.144.

- the Parthini (Gk. *Παρθηνοί*) who were closely related to the Taulanti and probably lived somewhat to the north of them, along the northern-central Albanian coast between Durrës and Lezha, or in the upper valley of the Shkumbin River;
- the Penestae (Gk. *Πενέσται*) who inhabited a settlement called Uscana or Hyscana, as yet unidentified; and
- the Taulanti (Gk. *Ταυλάντιοι*) who inhabited the region around Durrës and the basin of the Mat River. They were particularly prominent in the second half of the fourth century B.C. when they were ruled over by King Glaukias (Gk. *Γλαυκίας*, reg. ca. 335 - ca. 302 B.C.).

Unfortunately, we know very little about language or languages spoken by the Illyrians because they left no texts or inscriptions. All we have are place names and personal names to go by. Scholars agree that Illyrian was Indo-European, but it is unclear whether we are dealing with one or several different Indo-European idioms. We also lack definitive proof that Illyrian, in any of its possible forms, is the ancestor of modern Albanian, as is widely assumed today.

The history of the Illyrians was recorded, to a good extent, by Greek and Roman authors who, of course, treated them from their perspective. From these ancient historians and writers we know that when the first Greek traders settled along the Albanian coast, in Epidamnus (Durrës) and Apollonia, and established maritime trade routes there, they soon came into conflict with the native Illyrian tribes of the region. These tribes, or perhaps better ethnic groups, were, however, long disunited, with each one defending its own local interests.

In the second half of the third century B.C., the Illyrian tribes in Albania seem to have united to an extent to form the nucleus of a state that stretched from central Albania up to the Neretva (Neretva) River in Herzegovina. One of the early rulers of this state was Agron who held sway in the Shkodra region from ca. 250 to 231 B.C. and financed his Illyrian kingdom on piracy. These Illyrians were seafarers and their ships plundered Greek and Roman vessels in the Adriatic as far south as Epirus and Greece. In alliance with Demetrius II of Macedonia, Agron defeated the Aetolians in Acarnania in 231 B.C. but died after the battle of a heavy bout of drinking. He was then succeeded by his wife, Teuta, who reigned from Lezha (ancient Lissos) and acted from 231 B.C. onwards as a regent for her stepson Pinneus.

Teuta's ships and pirates also plundered Roman merchant vessels and interfered increasingly with Roman trade routes and interests in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. Rome sent envoys to her in Shkodra to demand reparations but to no avail. In 229 B.C., it therefore declared war on Illyria and sent armies to the Balkans for the first time, as well as a fleet of 200 ships. Teuta surrendered in 227 B.C. and, after having acknowledged Rome's primacy, having paid tribute and having relinquished the southern part of her territory, she was allowed to remain in power in a smaller region around Shkodra and Lezha.

In 220-219 B.C., a second Illyrian war was waged in a period when Rome was preoccupied by the growing power of Carthage. Demetrius of Pharos (Hvar), the regent and successor of Pinneus, attacked Roman forces in the Adriatic and devastated settlements as far away as the Cyclades and the Peloponnese, thereby violating his treaty agreements. His forces were defeated by a Roman fleet under Consul Lucius Aemilius Paullus, and Demetrius took refuge at the court of Philip V (238-179 B.C.) of Macedon.

In the following years, Rome was increasingly concerned by the rise and expansion of the Antigonid dynasty of Macedon under Philip V. The kingdom of Illyria, geographically situated between Rome and Macedon, served, so to speak, as a buffer state. When the Roman consul Titus Quinctius Flaminius (ca. 229 - ca. 174 B.C.) defeated the Macedonians in 197 B.C. at the Battle of Cynoscephalae in Thessaly and relieved Philip V of Macedon of most of his Greek possessions, the Illyrians under Pleuratus III (reg. ca 206-180) were accorded some Macedonian territory. However, Illyrian piracy continued unabated and when Pleuratus' successor, the last Illyrian king Genthius (reg. ca. 180-168 B.C.), provided assistance to another of Rome's enemies, King Perseus of Macedon, Rome waged a third war against Illyria in 168 B.C. Genthius was vanquished by the *praetor peregrinus*, Lucus Anicius Gallus, and Illyria thereafter came under Roman sway.

Greek Settlements and Roman Absorption

The earliest contacts of the native population of Albania with the outside world were, as we have seen, with the Greeks who settled on the Adriatic coast at Epidamnos and Apollonia.

Epidamnos (Gk. *Ἐπίδαμνος*) was settled in about 627 B.C. by Dorian colonists from Corinth and Corcyra (Corfu). In his work "Politics," the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) tells us that there was much internal strife within the ruling oligarchy of the new settlement. Ostracised magistrates appealed to Corinth for assistance whereas the democrats looked to Corcyra for help. The dispute proved to be the catalyst for a much wider conflict between the two Greek cities, which is described at length by the Greek historian Thucydides (ca. 460 - ca. 395 B.C.) in his "History of the Peloponnesian War." As an isolated settlement on the Adriatic coast, Epidamnos depended on commerce for survival, but trade with the native Illyrians was initially forbidden. In 345 B.C., the town was levelled by a powerful earthquake, which would not be the only one to strike it. With time, the settlement was rebuilt on its old foundations. When the Romans seized Epidamnos in 229 B.C., they changed the name to Dyrrhachium because the element *-damnus* in the Latin form of the name, Epidamnus, sounded inauspicious. The word Dyrrhachium evolved into the Italian form Durazzo and later into the modern Albanian form Durrës. The Greek geographer Pausanias (ca. 115 - ca. 180 A.D.), however, tells us in his "Description of Greece" that the Roman town was not at quite the same site as the Greek one. Nonetheless, Dyrrhachium grew in the Roman period, in particular because it was the major Balkan point of departure of the Via Egnatia. The Latin poet Catullus (ca. 84 - ca. 54 B.C.) called the settlement *Hadriae tabernam* "the tavern of the Adriatic." In 48 B.C. the Roman military and political leader Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, 106-48 B.C.) deployed his forces here during the Roman civil war and vanquished Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.) at the Battle of Dyrrhachium which was fought near *Petra Alba* (Shkëmbi i Kavajës), a few kilometres south of the town.

Apollonia (Gk. *Ἀπολλωνία*), the second early Greek colony in Albania, is situated north of the mouth of the river Vjosa, and is now near the town of Fier. It was founded in 588 B.C. by Dorian settlers from Corfu and Corinth and was a major urban centre in Albania for almost thousand years. Although now, due to a change in the coastline, it is located six kilometres inland, it was an important port in Greek and Roman times, and its harbour could hold 120 ships. A century after its foundation, in 480 B.C., a contingent of ships from Apollonia took part in the maritime Battle of Salamis, as Herodotus tells us. Around 460 B.C. it was in conflict with the Illyrian Amantes who were native to the region, but managed to keep the upper hand. In 436 B.C. it joined the other cities of Greece in supporting democratic forces in the conflict in Epidamnos and helped them take power over the aristocrats. In the fourth century B.C. it was then involved in war between the Dardanian king Bardyllis (Gk. *βάρδυλλις*, ca. 448-358 B.C.) and Philip II of Macedon (382-336 B.C.), the father of Alexander the Great. From around 314 B.C. it was allied with Cassander of Macedon (ca. 350-297 B.C.) in his struggle against the Illyrian king Glaukias of the Taulanti. When Glaukias defeated the Macedonians in 312 B.C., Apollonia regained its political autonomy. From 229 B.C., it was under Roman protection and served as an important Roman settlement in the Balkans, in particular as one of the two Balkan points of departure of the Via Egnatia. Julius Caesar had his stronghold here during the Roman civil war, and Octavian (63 B.C.-14 A.D.), who would later become the Emperor Augustus, studied at the famed school of rhetoric there for six months in 45-44 B.C. In this period, Apollonia prospered in trade and agriculture as a *civitas libera* (free city). Cicero (101-43 B.C.) visited it and called it a *magna urbs et gravis* (great and important city). The Greek historian Strabo (ca. 63 B.C. - ca. 23 A.D.) referred to it as a *πόλις ἐννομώτατη* (a city of good laws). It was only in the fourth century A.D., after an earthquake changed the course of the Vjosa River and deprived the town of its harbour, that Apollonia declined. It was largely abandoned in the sixth century.

For Albania, the settlements of Dyrrhachium and Apollonia, which were the ports of entry for Rome's expansion eastwards, were only the beginning of a process of Romanisation that took hold of the country and led to the gradual assimilation of the Illyrian tribes.

With the conquest of Illyria under Lucius Anicius Gallus in 168 B.C., native resistance began to wane. The country was devastated by the fighting, and the surviving population was exhausted. Some 150,000 people had been enslaved and 70 towns and settlements lay in ruins. Strabo later noted of the region:

“Now although in those earlier times, as I have said, all Epirus and the Illyrian country were rugged and full of mountains, such as Tomarus and Polyanus and several others, still they were populous; but at the present time desolation prevails in most parts, while the parts still inhabited survive only in villages and in ruins, and even the oracle at Dodona, like the rest, is virtually extinct.”³

Albania was of particular strategic importance to the Romans for communications purposes with the east. For this reason, around 146 B.C., the Roman proconsul Gnaeus Egnatius constructed a major Roman road through Albania known as the Via Egnatia. This route was more or less an extension of the Via Appia, that led from Rome to Brundisium (Brindisi). The Via Egnatia served to link Italy with Greece, i.e. with Thessalonica, and later with Byzantium. The major points of departure on the Albanian side of the Adriatic were Dyrrhachium and Apollonia. The routes from these two ports linked up at *Asparagium Dyrrhachinorum* (Rrogozhina) and continued as one road up the Shkumbin River past *Clodiana* (Peqin), *Mansio Scampa* (Elbasan) and *Tres Tabernae* (Qukës) to *Lychnidos* (Ohrid), *Heraclea Lyncestis* (Monastir/Bitola) and beyond. The Via Egnatia was Rome’s main link to its empire in the East, and this was all the more reason for keeping Albania under control.

With its difficult mountain terrain and swampy, mosquito-infested coastline, Albania may not have been the ideal place to move to, but the Romans began settling in Albania and the southern Balkans, initially with trading posts along the coast, but also with military camps that subsequently evolved into permanent settlements. With time, Roman colonists moved into the countryside and began cultivating the land as farmers. With them came all the attributes of Roman culture that superimposed itself upon the Greek, and led to the assimilation of the native population.

Throughout this period, Albania found itself on the cultural border that separated Latin influence to the north from Greek influence to the south. The dividing line between the two, known to historians as the Jireček Line,⁴ ran through Albania from around Laç (between Tirana and Lezha) in an easterly, slightly north-easterly direction. North of this line one encounters inscriptions primarily in Latin, whereas south of the line, and more overwhelmingly south of the Shkumbin valley, one encounters inscriptions in Greek. As a cultural divide, the Jireček Line still finds its reflection in Albania today. Christian Albanians to the north of it are Catholic in their vast majority, whereas Christian Albanians to the south of it are almost all Orthodox.

Administratively, by the middle of the first century B.C., Albania north of the Drin River was part the Roman province of Illyricum which extended northwards up the Adriatic coast. Central Albania from the Drin southward down to the bay of Vlora belonged to the province of Macedonia, which extended inland to Thrace. Kosovo for its part, known in Roman times as Dardania, was a part of the province of Moesia Superior.

Albania was part of the Roman Empire for about five centuries. The last Illyrian resistance to Roman rule, which took place farther north than Albania, in Dalmatia and Pannonia, was put down by the Emperor Tiberius in the years 6-9 A.D. Later, the Illyrians came to serve the empire, notably as soldiers and military conscripts, both in auxiliary regiments of the army and in the imperial fleet. The Romans looked upon these soldiers from the Balkans as uneducated and thoroughly uncivilised. Around 193 A.D., when the Emperor Septimus Severus (reg. 193-211) replaced the Praetorian Guard with men from Pannonia and Illyria and doubled its size, the historian and Roman senator Cassius Dio (ca. 163-229) noted: “[Severus] filled the city with a throng of motley soldiers, most savage in appearance, most terrifying in speech, and most boorish in conversation.”⁵ With time, however, some of these men rose in rank to become heads of legions and noted military commanders. Indeed in the third century A.D., Rome was ruled by a series of Illyrian emperors, the *Illyriciani*. These military men were able to recover some of Rome’s lost territories, both in Gaul and in the east. Prominent among them was the Emperor

³ Strabo, *Geography*, book 7, chapter 7. 9. Translation by Horace L. Jones. London: Loeb Classical Library edition, 1924.

⁴ The Jireček Line received its name from the Czech historian Konstantin Jireček (1854-1918) who first defined it in 1911.

⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 75.2, 6. Translation by Earnest Cary. London: Loeb Classical Library edition, 1927.

Diocletian (reg. 284-305) from Salona, near Split in Dalmatia, who strengthened the empire at a time of instability and crisis.

From Rome to Byzantium

It was under Diocletian, in 285 A.D., that the Roman Empire was divided into two halves: a western empire ruled from Rome, Milan or Trier, and an eastern, more prosperous empire which came to be ruled from Byzantium. During the definitive separation of the empire after the death of the Emperor Theodosius the Great (reg. 379-395), Roman Illyricum found itself split between east and west. Albanian territory, encompassed in the provinces of Moesia, Dardania and Epirus, went to the eastern, Byzantine half of the empire. This Illyricum had in reality been brought to a demise in August 378 A.D., when the Emperor Valens (reg. 364-378), who stemmed from Cibalae, now Vinkovci in the Danube region of Croatia, was defeated by the Visigoths, a Germanic tribe, at the Battle of Adrianopolis in Thrace.

The collapse of the Roman Empire and its division took place during the age of barbarian invasions, the so-called migration period of European history. After their victory over the Romans, the Visigoths continued southwards into Greece, taking Athens in 395 A.D. From there, they invaded Albania and continued up the Adriatic coast and over into Italy. Their king Alaric is remembered in history for the final humiliation of the once great empire - for the sacking of Rome in 410 A.D. Other barbarian peoples migrated through the southern Balkans, too. The Alani, an Iranian people from the region north of the Caucasus mountains, ancestors of the modern Ossetians, passed through the southern Balkans in the fifth century. The formidable Huns, a Turkic people from central Asia, took a fortress in Moesia and ravaged Thrace in about 408 A.D. In the sixth century, Slavic tribes invaded the Balkans, reaching Kosovo and Durrës in 548 A.D. As opposed to the earlier migrating tribes who pillaged and then set off for greener pastures, or who were assimilated, the Slavs stayed and settled in the Balkans. Large numbers of them occupied Macedonia and Thessaly, and indeed much of mainland Greece. From place names, we know that Slavic settlements were also widespread throughout Albania, and it can be assumed that the Slavs came to form the majority population in the region for several centuries. Remnants of the Illyrian-speaking or otherwise native population were no doubt relegated to the higher, more isolated mountain regions.

Little can be said of Albania in the following centuries for lack of information and written source material. In the ninth century, Albania, although nominally Byzantine, came under the influence of the first Bulgarian Empire, founded by Khan Krum (reg. 803-814). Byzantium, hard pressed in Albania and elsewhere, reacted by creating special province (*theme*) in Dyrrhachion (Durrës) in 850, but its influence was largely restricted to the coastal region. The Bulgarians continued expanding from the east. Around 850, they took Kosovo, and the following year they invaded Albania proper, seizing the fortresses of Ohrid and Deabolis (Devoll).⁶ Boris I (reg. 852-889) conquered Berat and the Albanian coast north of Vlora, and his third son, Simeon the Great (reg. 893-927), who titled himself “tsar of the Bulgarians and autocrat of the Greeks,” was lord of virtually all of southern Albania. The Bulgarian Empire was at this time at the zenith of its expansion. In about 904, Simeon is said to have ruled over about thirty fortresses in the *theme* of Dyrrhachion, although he did not manage to take Durrës itself. Under Tsar Samuel (997-1014), who ruled from Ohrid, Durrës, however, fell to the Bulgarians who also conquered the neighbouring Serbian principality of Doclea (Duklja) in Montenegro. It was with the death of Tsar Samuel in October of 1014 that the first Bulgarian Empire began to crumble. His successor Gabriel Radomir (reg. 1014-1015) was murdered by his cousin Ivan Vladislav who, in turn, was killed in battle with the Byzantines under the walls of Durrës in February 1018. Thereafter, Albania returned to Byzantine rule.

⁶ The exact location of Deabolis (Devoll) is uncertain. Ptolemy mentions it as *Δηβολία* (Ptol. III, 12, 23). Anna Comnena referred to it as *Δεάβολις* in 1082 (*Alexiad* V, 4; XIII, 5) and the Arab geographer Muhammed al-Idrisi called it *dâb.lî* ~ *Daboli* in 1154. The root of the word is pre-Slavic, but it was confused through a folk etymology with the term for the “devil,” i.e. the river of the devil: *πόταμος Δεαβόλεως* (Anna Comnena), *flumen Diaboli*, and later even *flumen Daemonis* (Fulcherius Carnotensis). Most Byzantine sources referred to *Deabolis* as being in the vicinity of lakes Ohrid and Prespa, somewhere near the present-day district of Devoll. It has recently been associated with the settlement of Zvezda on the edge of plain of Korça.

Theories on the Origins of the Albanians

Originally a small herding community in the southern Balkans, the Albanians grew in the second millennium A.D. and spread their settlements throughout the southwest of the peninsula. With time, as well as with innate vigour, unconscious persistence and much luck, they came to take their place among the nation states of Europe. But who were the Albanians and where did they come from?

Much has been written and speculated about the origins of the Albanian people. From their language, we know that they are Indo-Europeans, and they seem to be native to the southern Balkans. However, whether or not they stem directly from the ancient Illyrians, as is widely assumed by the modern Albanians, or from the Dacians or Thracians or some other ancient Balkan people or peoples, is very much open to question. There has been passionate interest in the subject, in particular among the Albanians themselves, and, as is not uncommon in southeastern Europe, theories have been propounded with much passion and fervour.

It was the Swedish historian Johann Erich Thunmann (1746-1778), professor of rhetoric and philosophy at the University of Halle in Germany, who first postulated the Illyrian origin of the Albanians. In his German-language treatise *Über die Geschichte und Sprache der Albaner und der Wlachen* (On the History and Language of the Albanians and Vlachs, Leipzig 1774),⁷ Thunmann expressed no doubt: "I would now like to turn to the actual history of the Albanians and of the country they inhabit. They are the descendents of the ancient Illyrians." The theory of Illyrian origin, held by most Albanians nowadays, is primarily supported by the fact that the Albanian language is now spoken in the same region where ancient Illyrian was once spoken and by the absence of any indication that the Albanians immigrated there from elsewhere. However, we know too little about the Illyrian language to prove a connection linguistically, and this is a crucial deficit. Of the few glosses of Illyrian that we have - mostly toponyms and anthroponyms - some words could be interpreted as Albanian, but there are not enough of them to make a convincing case. Interesting in connection with an Illyrian origin is also the reference in the Roman period by the Greek historian Ptolemy to the Illyrian tribe of the Albani or Albanoi, and to the settlement of Albanopolis.

Other scholars have postulated a theory of the Thracian or Dacian origin of the Albanians. Both of these ancient peoples, who were probably related to one another, lived to the east of present Albanian territory, in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula. In a book published in 1994,⁸ German professor Gottfried Schramm (b. 1929) linked the Albanians to the ancient Bessi or Bessoï (Gk. *Βέσσοι* or *Βῆσσοι*), a Thracian tribe living around ancient Remesia (Bela Palanka) in the current Serbian-Bulgarian-Macedonian border region. According to Schramm, these Bessi, who converted to Christianity very early, were pushed westward into Albania in the early ninth century and took on the geographical name of their new homeland. In support of this theory are several central Balkan toponyms, such as Astibos > Štip, Scupi > Alb. Shkup (Skopje), and Naissus > Niš, that are said to have evolved in accordance with developments in Albanian phonology. However, other comparisons between Albanian and Thracian, of which we know slightly more than of Illyrian, have not shown any convincing linguistic connection.

Most of what we know about the early origins of the Albanians derives from internal linguistic evidence. As an Indo-European idiom, Albanian is genetically related to all of the surrounding languages of the region (Slavic, Greek, Romance), but it is considered an Indo-European branch of its own. Its historical evolution has been extraordinarily complex since ancient times, making it a nightmare for diachronic linguists. To an original ancient Balkan language component, whatever it may have been, was added a strong, almost overwhelming stratum of Latin and Romance vocabulary, and well as much Slavic and, in later times, a good deal of Turkish and some Greek influence. When mixed together, these components make the history of Albanian opaque, unlike classical old languages such as Lithuanian or

⁷ For an English translation of Thunmann, see <http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts16-18/AH1774.html>

⁸ Gottfried Schramm. *Anfänge des albanischen Christentums: die frühe Bekehrung der Bessen und ihre langen Folgen* [The Beginnings of Albanian Christianity: the Early Conversion of the Bessi and its Long-term Consequences]. Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1994. 270 pp.

Icelandic in which historical linguists relish. It is virtually impossible to see through the various strata in the Albanian language to discover any particular ancient ethnic origin.

Several moments in the linguistic evolution of Albanian are, nonetheless, of undeniable significance in understanding something about the early stages of the language and its speakers. Firstly, early Albanian, if we can call it such, was not much influenced by ancient Greek. The surprisingly paucity of early loanwords from Greek leads us to the conclusion that the early Albanians did not live as direct neighbours of the ancient Greeks. Secondly, there are numerous curious lexemes (over 100 of them) that occur only in Albanian and in Romanian. They are terms that are part of the pre-Romance vocabulary of Romanian, and its sister language, Aromanian/Vlach, and as such are very old. This leads us to suppose that the ancestors of the Albanians and the ancestors of the Romanians were in close contact at some time, probably as transhumant shepherds in the interior of the southern Balkans.

Thirdly, there is the major dialect division in the Albanian language, between the Gheg (northern Albanian) dialect spoken north of the Shkumbin River, and the Tosk (southern Albanian) dialect spoken south of the Shkumbin River, which seems to have implications. One of the most prominent features of this dialect split is the historical evolution of an “n” between vowels (VnV). In the southern dialect, this “n” was “rhotacised”, i.e. turned into an “r”. For example, the present term for “Albania” is *Shqyp(ë)nia* in Gheg and *Shqipëria* in Tosk. The rhotacism of southern Albanian is a very ancient development because it occurs in Latin loanwords, too, e.g. Lat. *arena* “sand” became Gheg *ranë* but Tosk *rërë*; Lat. *vinum* “wine” became Gheg *venë* but Tosk *verë*. However, rhotacism does not usually occur in Slavic loanwords, that obviously entered the Albanian language after the Slavic invasion of the sixth century. As such, the sixth-century Ghegs and Tosks must have been geographically more or less where they are today. Had the early Albanians immigrated to their present territory from somewhere else, even from the nearby southern central Balkans, it is unlikely they would have done so in two clear and distinct dialect groups.

Having said this, it must be stressed that the ethnic history of the southern Balkans and of its inhabitants, is infinitely complex. Peoples have been on the move for centuries, if only to find summer pasture for their sheep, and there are many features of grammar, morphology, syntax, phonology and vocabulary common to all the Balkan languages (*Balkan Sprachbund*), that evince centuries of contact and mutual influence. Just as one modern human being does not stem from one ancient couple, but rather hundreds of ancestors, it is probably illusory to search for one origin of a people, especially in the muddy waters of the Balkans.

Recent genetic studies have provided new information on the origins of the Albanians that may be significant. In a paper published at the University of California, Davis, in July 2012, it was noted in particular that:

“The highest levels of IBD [identity by descent] sharing are found in the Albanian-speaking individuals (from Albania and Kosovo), an increase in common ancestry deriving from the last 1,500 years. This suggests that a reasonable proportion of the ancestors of modern-day Albanian speakers are drawn from a relatively small, cohesive population that has persisted for at least the last 1,500 years. These individuals share similar numbers of common ancestors with nearby populations as do individuals in other parts of Europe, implying that the Albanian speakers have not been a particularly isolated population so much as a small one.”⁹

The First References to the Albanians

As has been noted above, the first millennium of Albanian history had little to do with the Albanian peoples themselves. As an ethnic group, the Albanians first emerged from the mists of history in the early years of the second millennium A.D. The name by which they became known, based on a root **alban-* and its rhotacized variants **arban-*, **albar-* and **arbar-*, first appears from the eleventh century onwards in Byzantine chronicles as *Albanoi*, *Arbanitai* and *Arbanites*, and from the fourteenth century onwards in Latin and other Western documents as *Albanenses* and *Arbanenses*.

⁹ Peter Ralph & Graham Coop. *The Geography of Recent Genetic Ancestry across Europe*. Cornell University Library, July 2012. <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1207.3815v1.pdf>.

What is possibly the earliest written reference to the Albanians is that to be found in an old Bulgarian text compiled around the beginning of the eleventh century. It was discovered in a Serbian manuscript dated 1628 and was first published in 1934 by Radoslav Grujić (1878-1955). This fragment of a legend from the time of Tsar Samuel endeavours, in a catechetical “question and answer” form, to explain the origins of peoples and languages. It divides the world into seventy-two languages and three religious categories: Orthodox, half-believers (i.e. non-Orthodox Christians) and non-believers. Though the Serbs go unmentioned, the Albanians, still a small conglomeration of nomadic mountain tribes at this time, find their place among the nations of half-believers, i.e. Catholics. If we accept the dating of Grujić, which is based primarily upon the contents of the text as a whole, this would be the earliest written document referring to the Albanians as a people or language group. It reads as follows:

“It can be seen that there are various languages on earth. Of them, there are five Orthodox languages: Bulgarian, Greek, Syrian, Iberian (Georgian) and Russian. Three of these have Orthodox alphabets: Greek, Bulgarian and Iberian. There are twelve languages of half-believers: Alamanians, Franks, Magyars (Hungarians), Indians, Jacobites, Armenians, Saxons, Lechs (Poles), **Arbanasi** (Albanians), Croatians, Hizi, Germans.”¹⁰

Michael Attaleiates was a Byzantine lawyer and historian who rose to high office under the emperors Romanus IV (r. 1067-1071) and Michael VII (r. 1071-1078). His “History,” covering the years 1034-1079, is a largely eyewitness account of political and military events in the Byzantine Empire. It was during this period that the Byzantine Greeks first took note of the Albanians as a people, as seen by the references made to them by Attaliates in the following passages:

“When the Emperor Michael [Michael IV (r. 1034-1041)], who passed away in piety and whose home is known to have been the province of Paphlagonia, took up the sceptre of the Byzantine Empire, the Agarene [Arab] people in Sicily in the West were defeated by Byzantine naval and land forces. And had not the well-known George Maniakes, who had been entrusted with the general command, been eliminated on the slanderous accusation that he was hungry for power, and had not the military command of the war been transferred to others, that large and renowned island, blessed with large cities knowing no lack of precious goods, would still be under Byzantine control. Now, however, jealousy has destroyed not only the man and his endeavours, but also that enormous undertaking [i.e. the recapture of Sicily in 1038-1040]. For when subsequent commanders made base and shameful plans and decisions, not only was the island lost to Byzantium, but also the greater part of the army. Unfortunately, the people who had once been our allies and who possessed the same rights as citizens and the same religion, i.e. **the Albanians** and the Latins (*Ἀλβανοὶ καὶ Λατῖνοι*), who live in the Italian regions of our Empire beyond Western Rome, quite suddenly became enemies when Michael Dokenianos insanely directed his command against their leaders...

Constantine IX Monomachos proved to be more benevolent on the imperial throne than his predecessor. He conveyed imperial honours and gifts to almost everyone with ambition, and delighted his subjects. Suddenly storm clouds gathered in the West and threatened him with nothing less than destruction and expulsion from the throne. The aforementioned George with the surname Maniakes, thirsting for blood, began an uprising in the Italian part of the Empire with Byzantine and **Albanian** (*Ρωμαίων καὶ Ἀλβανῶν*) soldiers there, being offended because the emperor had shown him a lack of respect and fearing the emperor in view of previous hostilities. He caused great turmoil in the rest of the army opposing him and took it over. After having set up his camp at a two days' march from Thessalonika, he made his attack on the imperial camp in the evening...

When this had taken place and the usurpers had gradually calmed down, another disaster began to take its course and to spread like a poisonous weed intent on destroying the crops. The danger came from the city of Epidamnus (Durrës). The Protoprohedros Duke Basiliakes, who

¹⁰ Radoslav Grujić. Legenda iz vremena Cara Samuila o poreklu naroda. in: *Glasnik skopskog naučnog društva*, Skopje, 13 (1934), p. 198-200. Translated by Robert Elsie.

had been sent there by the emperor, having succeeded in avoiding Bryennius and withdrawing from Adrianopole, took over Durrës and assembled an army there from all the surrounding regions. By soliciting support for his side by means of substantial gifts, he succeeded in having the Franks enter his territory from Italy and attempted to make use of them for his side. By various pretences and means, he collected money from everyone under his order and command, set up a list and used as a pretext for this arms buildup the fact that he intended to attack Bryennius as a renegade. Once he had ensured that he had indeed assembled a large army and forces fit for action, composed of Byzantine Greeks, Bulgarians and **Albanians** (*βουλγάρων τε καὶ Ἀρβανιτῶν*) and of his own soldiers, he set off and hastened to Thessalonika...”¹¹

Normans, Byzantines, Serbs and Venetians

The final rupture between Roman Catholicism and Byzantine Orthodoxy in Europe took place in 1054 after Pope Leo IX (reg. 1048-1054) directed his representative in Constantinople to leave a papal bull on the altar of the Church of Saint Sophia, anathematizing the “seven mortal heresies” of the Greeks and excommunicating the patriarch of Constantinople. The patriarch, in turn, anathematized the pope, thus making the Oriental or Eastern Schism inevitable. Albania was on the frontier between east and west and found itself divided by the great schism. Most of central and southern Albania remained under the Byzantine rite and rule, while northern Albania stayed in communion with the Latin Church and was increasingly associated with Italy and Venice.

By the middle of the eleventh century, the Normans held sway over much of southern Italy, especially in Apulia across the Adriatic from Albania, and it was at this time of religious and political tension between the Orthodox east and the Catholic west, that the Norman rulers of southern Italy set their sights on Albania as a stepping stone to the conquest and submission of Byzantium. Robert de Hauteville (ca. 1015-1085), known as Robert Guiscard, was the sixth son of Tancred de Hauteville (980-1041). Born and raised in Normandy, he arrived in the region to join his relatives there in about 1047, and rose slowly to power among them. By 1059, he had created an autonomous realm in Calabria and thereafter became known as the Duke of Apulia and Calabria. In May 1081, Robert crossed the Adriatic Sea to Vlora with 16,000 men, of whom there were 1,300 Norman knights. He swiftly seized Vlora and Corfu, but suffered a setback when his fleet was destroyed by storm and by a Venetian naval attack. Robert’s forces pounded the fortress of Durrës all summer long in order to take it from the Byzantines. In October 1081, the Byzantine Emperor, Alexius I Comnenus (reg. 1081-1118), arrived in Albania in person with an army of some 20,000 men and set up camp on the banks of the Erzen River. In the ensuing Battle of Durrës on 18 October 1081, Byzantine forces were defeated by the Normans. During the fighting, which is described in vivid detail by the Emperor’s daughter, Anna Comnena (1083-1153), in her biographical account *The Alexiad*, Alexius was separated from his guards and was wounded, but he managed to escape from the Normans on horseback near Ndroq and made his way back to Ohrid.

“Robert reached the sanctuary of St Nicolas, where was the imperial tent and all the Roman baggage. He then despatched all his fit men in pursuit of Alexius, while he himself stayed there, gloating over the imminent capture of the enemy. Such were the thoughts that fired his arrogant spirit. His men pursued Alexius with great determination as far as a place called by the natives Kake Pleura [Ndroq]. The situation was as follows: below there flows the River Charzanes [Erzen]; on the other side was a high, overhanging rock. The pursuers caught up with him between these two. They struck at him on the left side with their spears (there were nine of them in all) and forced him to the right. No doubt he would have fallen, had not the sword which he grasped in his right hand rested firmly on the ground. What is more, the spur tip on his left foot caught in the edge of the saddle cloth (which they call a *hypostroma*) and this made him less liable to fall. He grabbed the horse’s mane with his left hand and pulled himself up. It was no doubt some divine power that saved him from his enemies in an unexpected way, for it caused

¹¹ Michaelis Attaliothae. *Historia*, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (Bonn: Weber 1853), p. 9, 18, 297. Translated by Robert Elsie.

other Kelts to aim their spears at him from the right. The spear points, thrust towards his right side, suddenly straightened him and kept him in equilibrium. It was indeed an extraordinary sight. The enemies on the left strove to push him off; those on the right plunged their spears at his flank, as if in competition with the first group, opposing spear to spear. Thus the emperor was kept upright between them. He settled himself more firmly in the saddle, gripping horse and saddle cloth alike more tightly with his legs. It was at this moment that the horse gave proof of its nobility. Under any circumstances, it was unusually agile and spirited, of exceptional strength, a real warhorse (Alexius had actually acquired him from Bryennius, together with the purple-dyed saddle cloth when he took him prisoner during the reign of Nicephorus Botaniates). To put it shortly, this charger was now spirited by Divine Providence: he suddenly leapt through the air and landed on top of the rock I mentioned before as if he had been raised on wings - or to use the language of mythology, as if he had taken the wings of Pegasus. Bryennius used to call him Sgouritzes (Dark Bay). Some of the barbarians' spears, striking at empty air, fell from their hands; others, which had pierced the emperor's clothing, remained there and were carried off with the horse when he jumped. Alexius quickly cut away these trailing weapons. Despite the terrible dangers in which he found himself, he was not troubled in spirit, nor was he confused in thought; he lost no time in choosing the expedient course and contrary to all expectation escaped from his enemies. The Kelts stood open-mouthed, astonished by what had happened, and indeed it was a most amazing thing. They saw that he was making off in a new direction and followed him once more. When he was a long way ahead of his pursuers he wheeled round and, coming face to face with one of them, drove his spear through the man's chest. He fell at once to the ground, flat on his back. Turning about, Alexius continued on his way. However, he fell in with several Kelts who had been chasing Romans further on. They saw him a long way off and halted in a line, shield to shield, partly to rest their horses, but at the same time hoping to take him alive and present him as a prize of war to Robert. Pursued by enemies from behind and confronted by others, Alexius despaired on his life; but he gathered his wits and noting in the centre of his enemies one man who, from his physical appearance and the flashing brightness of his armour, he thought was Robert, he steadied his horse and charged at him. His opponent also levelled his spear and they both advanced across the intervening space to do battle. The emperor was first to strike, taking careful aim with his spear. The weapon pierced the Kelt's breast and passed through his back. Straightway he fell to the ground mortally wounded, and died on the spot. Thereupon Alexius rode off through the centre of their broken line. The killing of this barbarian had saved him. The man's friends, when they saw him wounded and hurled to the ground, gathered round and tended him as he lay there. The others, pursuing from the rear, meanwhile dismounted from their horses and recognized the dead man. They beat their breasts in grief, for although he was not Robert, he was a distinguished noble, and Robert's right-hand man. While they busied themselves over him, the emperor was well on his way...

After this, the Kelts went on their way to Robert. When the latter saw them empty-handed and learnt what had happened to them, he bitterly censured all of them and one in particular, whom he even threatened to flog, calling him a coward and an ignoramus in war. The fellow expected to be put to horrible torture - because he had not leapt onto the rock with his own horse and either struck and murdered Alexius, or grabbed him and brought him alive to Robert. For this Robert, in other respects the bravest and the most daring of men, was also full of bitterness, swift to anger, with a heart overflowing with wrath. In his dealing with enemies he had one of two objects: either to run through with his spear any man who resisted him, or to do away with himself, cutting the thread of Fate, so to speak. However, the soldier whom he accused now gave a vivid account of the ruggedness and inaccessibility of the rock: no one, he added, whether on foot or on horseback, could climb it without divine aid - not to mention a man at war and engaged in fighting; even without war it was impossible to venture its ascent. "If you can't believe a word I say," he cried, "try it yourself - or let some other knight, however daring, have a go. He will see it's out of the question. Anyway, if someone should conquer that rock, not only minus wings but even with them, then I myself am ready to endure any punishment you'd like to name and to be damned for cowardice." These words, which expressed the man's wonder and amazement, appeased Robert's fury; his anger turned to admiration. As for the emperor, after

spending two days and nights in travel through the winding paths of the neighbouring mountains and all that impassable region, he arrived at Achrida [Ohrid]. On the way, he crossed the Charzanes and waited for a short time near a place called Babagora [Krraba Mountains between Tirana and Elbasan] a remote valley. Neither the defeat nor any of the other evils of war troubled his mind; he was not worried in the slightest by the pain from his wounded forehead; but in his heart he grieved deeply for those who had fallen in the battle and especially for the men who had fought bravely. Nevertheless, he applied himself wholly to the problems of the city of Dyrrachium [Durrës] and it hurt him to recall that it was now without its leader, Palaeologus (for he had been unable to return - the war had moved so fast). To the best of his ability he ensured the safety of the inhabitants and entrusted the protection of the citadel to the Venetian officers who had migrated there. All the rest of the city was put under the command of Komiskortes, a native of Albania (τῷ ἔξ Ἀβανῶν ὀρμουμένῳ), to whom he gave profitable advice for the future in letters.

It was generally agreed and some actually said that Robert was an exceptional leader, quick-witted, of fine appearance, courteous, a clever conversationalist with a loud voice, accessible, of gigantic stature, with hair invariably of the right length and a thick beard; he was always careful to observe the customs of his own race; he preserved to the end the youthful bloom which distinguished his face and indeed his whole body, and was proud of it - he had the physique of a true leader; he treated with respect all his subjects, especially those who were more than usually devoted to him. On the other hand, he was niggardly and grasping in the extreme, a very good businessman, most covetous and full of ambition. Dominated as he was by these traits, he attracted much censure from everyone. Some people blame the emperor for losing his head and starting the war with Robert prematurely. According to them, if he had not provoked Robert too soon, he would have beaten him easily in any case, for Robert was being shot at from all directions, by the Albanians (ἄβανιτῶν) and by Bodinus' men from Dalmatia. But of course fault-finders stand out of weapon range and the acid darts they fire at the contestants come from their tongues. The truth is that Robert's manliness, his marvellous skill in war and his steadfast spirit are universally recognized. He was an adversary not readily vanquished, a very tough enemy who was more courageous than ever in his hour of defeat."¹²

The fortress of Durrës was finally taken in February 1082. Robert Guiscard then advanced southwards, getting almost to Salonika, before he was compelled by uprisings in Apulia to return to Italy. He left the further conquest of the southern Balkans to his son, Bohemond, Prince of Taranto (ca. 1058-1111), who got as far as Larissa in Thessaly but who was eventually defeated by the Emperor. However, the Venetians, who had come to an understanding with the Byzantines, recaptured Durrës and returned it to the empire. In the summer of 1085, Robert Guiscard made a second attempt to conquer the Balkans but he died of a fever during the campaign, after taking Corfu and Cephalonia.

Interestingly enough, in 1081, Anna Comnena mentions the existence of a territory in Albania called Arbanon, though she does not specify exactly where it was situated. It has subsequently been identified as an inland area stretching from the Mat River down to the Shkumbin and possibly Seman Rivers. It was centred around the fortress of Kruja and seems to have developed into the first nucleus of an Albanian state.

In 1096, it was the knights and crusading armies of Catholic Europe that passed through Albania and pillaged it on their way to Constantinople. Although the ultimate goal of the First Crusade (1096-1099) was to free the Holy Land of the Muslim infidels, the Crusaders advanced initially to come to the aid of their one-time rival, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, who was hard now pressed by the Seljuk Turks of Anatolia. Many of them firstly made their way to Durrës by sea and then continued overland along the route of the ancient Via Egnatia.

The second half of the twelfth century saw the rise of Rascia (Raška), northwest of Kosovo, as the nucleus of the Serb state under the Nemanja dynasty. Stefan I Nemanja (reg. 1166-1196) initially inherited part of Rascia and soon took over all of it. In 1184, as Grand Župan, he extended his realm

¹² Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, IV 7-8, Bonn: Weber, 1836, p. 215-221 and p. 293-294. Translated from the Greek by E. R. A. Sewter in: *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, London: Penguin, 1969, p. 149-153 and p. 195.

into Dioclea, northern Albania and Kosovo. A biography written by his son mentions that he conquered the district of Prizren, although he does not seem to have held it for long. By the time Stefan I Nemanja abdicated in 1196 and departed for Mount Athos to live as a monk, the foundations had been laid for a powerful Serbian dynasty that came to rule much of the Balkans. He was succeeded by his son, Stefan II Nemanja (reg. 1196-1228), who took over most of western Kosovo (except the region around Prizren) by 1208. Prizren itself was finally conquered by 1216. Three years later, in 1219, Sava Nemanja (Saint Sava), brother of Stefan II Nemanja, established an autocephalic Serbian Orthodox Church and expelled Greek bishops from Kosovo. The Nemanja dynasty played an important role in the history of Kosovo and virtually all of Albania until about the middle of the fourteenth century.

Small by comparison was the aforementioned state of Arbanon, which attained full, though temporary political independence in 1204 after the pillage of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. Its third ruler was a certain Demetrios who reigned from the death of his father Progon in 1208 to his own death in 1216. Demetrios of Arbanon married a daughter of Stefan II Nemanja who was later to become the first king of Serbia. She was also the niece of the Byzantine emperor, Alexios III Angelos (reg. 1195-1203). Demetrios was thus accorded the Byzantine titles *Megas Archon* and *Panhypers Sebastos* which were originally reserved for members of the imperial family in Byzantium. In 1208, he concluded a trading agreement with Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and was in contact with Pope Innocent III (reg. 1198-1216). With the death of Demetrios in 1216, however, Arbanon fell to the Despotate of Epirus and subsequently came under Bulgarian rule.

In the following decades, Albania found itself at the mercy of various regional powers striving for supremacy in the southern Balkans: the Byzantine Empire, the Despotate of Epirus, Bulgarian and Serbian empires, and the forces of the West that would soon be added to the mixture. Venice had taken possession of Durrës in 1205 and with time it would transform the whole of the Adriatic into a Venetian lake.

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