

Albania Sacra. Geistliche Visitationsberichte aus Albanien 1: Diözese Alessio. Herausgegeben und bearbeitet von Peter Bartl. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2007 (Albanische Forschungen, 26.1). 469 pp. ISBN 978-3-447-05506-2. € 94.

The first volume of *Albania Sacra: Geistliche Visitationsberichte aus Albanien*, is the grand start of an ambitious project to publish a large number of historical documents, primarily ecclesiastical reports and letters sent back to the Vatican, on the situation of the Catholic Church and the Catholic community in Albania in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This first volume, dealing in particular with the Diocese of Alessio (Lezha), contains fifty-six documents. A further four volumes are envisaged.

Much of northern and central Albania was in the fold of the Catholic Church until the Ottoman invasion and colonisation of the country in the fifteenth century. By 1431, the Turks had incorporated all of southern Albania into the Ottoman Empire and set up a sandjak administration, but the mountainous north of the country initially remained under the control of its autonomous tribal leaders, though now under the suzerain power of the sultan. It is known that by 1577 northern and central Albania were still largely Catholic, but by the early decades of the seventeenth century, an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population had “turned Turk,” i.e. converted to Islam. By the close of that century, Muslims outnumbered Christians almost everywhere in the country. The Catholic Church in Albania was thus in a period of profound decay in seventeenth-century Albania. In 1622, with a view to supporting Catholic Christians “in partibus infidelium,” i.e. in regions not under the sway of the Church, in Albania and elsewhere, the Vatican founded the Holy Congregation “De Propaganda Fide.” In order to gain information on the lot of the faithful in Ottoman-occupied Albania, the Congregation insisted that Church officials in Albania report regularly on the situation in their dioceses. These numerous reports are preserved in the Historical Archives of the Propaganda Fide (*Archivio Storico della S. Congregazione ‘de Propaganda Fide’*) in Rome, and very few of them have been published up to now.

Munich historian Peter Bartl (b. 1938) is well-known for his interest in sixteenth to nineteenth-century Albania. He is the author of a solid and reliable overview of Albanian history from the Middle Ages to the present, *Albanien: vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg 1995), as well as of *Die albanischen Muslime zur Zeit des nationalen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung, 1878-1912* (Wiesbaden 1968) and the two-volume *Quellen und Materialien zur albanischen Geschichte im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden 1975, Munich 1979).

In retirement but certainly not inactive, Bartl has now taken it upon himself to publish all the major ecclesiastical reports of the period, relating to the Catholic dioceses of Alessio (Lezha), Durazzo (Durrës), Sappa-Sarda (Sapa-Shurdhah), Scutari (Shkodra) and Pulati (Pult). The first volume in this series, as noted above, is devoted to the Diocese of Alessio, the region around present-day Lezha between Tirana and Shkodra, where a Catholic community is still to be found today.

The volume begins with a short preface (p. 9-11) in which the author explains the significance of the ecclesiastical reports for Albanian history. The first major section of the book then offers a description of the Diocese of Alessio in the Ottoman period (p. 13-66). This includes a short introduction to the political history of Alessio; the history of the diocese and its complicated hierarchical relations between the Archbishopric of Bar (Antivari) and the Archbishopric of Durrës, together with a list of bishops; the geographical spread of the diocese with its often changing borders; the various places of residence of the bishops over time; information about schools; details on and lists of parishes; records about churches, parishes and other ecclesiastical buildings; the activities of the parish priests; the Orders of

the Church present in the region, in particular the Franciscans; the history of the Abbey of Mirdita at Orosh that from 1888 enjoyed a special status as an *abbatia nullius*; the gradual conversion of much of the population to Islam and the phenomenon of Crypto-Christianity; and complaints about the lax customs of the population (widespread thievery, irregular marital relations, and excessive feasting). This section concludes with an overview of political developments in the diocese and region of Alessio.

Bartl admits that little political information is to be had from the reports because the church officials were interested more in ecclesiastical than in secular affairs. This part is followed by a bibliography (p. 67-68), a list of weights and measurements (p. 69-70), and a concordance of placenames (p. 71-79).

The second major section of the book (p. 81-450) provides the ecclesiastical reports themselves. The fifty-six texts dating from 1692 to 1912 are given in the original Italian. One text, the *mémoire* of French Consul Wiet, is in French and is an exception not only because of the language but because it provides a “secular”, i.e. non-ecclesiastical description of the Diocese of Alessio. Each text is preceded by a short explanation of its contents and significance. Concluding the volume is a useful index of personal and place names (p. 451-469), though there are a few mistakes in the page numbers given.

Most of the ecclesiastical reports presented in this volume follow a standard model. They usually begin, as Bartl notes, with geographical information and the borders of the diocese, often with elements of history. They then recount the ecclesiastical visit as it advances from settlement to settlement, including distances and road conditions. Each parish is described in detail, with information on the condition of the local church and the impression made by the local priest, on the number of Catholics and on those excommunicated or who have converted to Islam. Then come lists of abuses, such as crimes and infringements of church marriages, and finally a calculation of the parish’s financial and other needs.

The value of these ecclesiastical reports, seen from a modern perspective, lies not so much in any historical depth, but in the mass of details they provide. Each visitor, among whom are figures such as Benedetto Orsini, Stefano Gaspari, Giorgio Vladagni, Nicolò Vladagni, Vincenzo Zmaievich (published by Bartl in full in 1975/1979), Antonio Criesesi, Paolo Duoda (Pal Doda), Michele Criesesi, Nicolò Malci, Giovanni Topich (1790-1853), Paolo Dodmassei, M. Wiet, Francesco Malczy ski (1829-1908), Primo Doçi (Prek Doçi, 1846-1917) and Luigi Bumçi (1872-1945), adds a great deal to our knowledge of the region.

Anyone looking for specific details of Catholic Albania over the centuries, be they ecclesiastical or topographical, will delight in this book, assuming of course that they can read seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italian. A translation of the texts would have made the information in the book more accessible.

If any criticism were to be made of this otherwise excellent volume, it would only be of a structural nature, that the bibliography, list of weights and measurements, and concordance are to be found in the middle of the book instead of at the end where one would normally look for them.

Robert Elsie
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