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GEORGE KASTRIOTIS SKANDERBEG: AN UNKNOWN BIOGRAPHY IN GREEK LANGUAGE (LATE XVIIth C. – 1770)

The reason I have been invited to this symposium dedicated by Albania to the important personality of George Kastriotis the so-called Scanderbeg is a recent discovery I made, an unknown biography in Greek, half a century older than the one known until now as “the first Greek biography of Kastriotis”, that is the one published in Moscow in 1812, which was also in Greek, but with a different content¹. Therefore, this discovery is the topic of my paper².

The biographies written to promote and praise George Kastriotis-Skanderbeg, a personage who became a legend for his military successes against the Ottomans in the Balkans in the 15th century, are numerous, vary in length, and have appeared in various languages.

Since the first decade of the 16th century, when the first biography appeared in Europe, until 1812 when it was believed that his first biography in Greek was written, biographies had been published in Latin, Italian, German, French, English, Portuguese, and of course in Albanian³. It is however strange that the Greek public learned the achievements of Kastriotis as late as 1812, a date very close to the

¹ *Επιτομή της ιστορίας Γεωργίου του Καστριώτου του επονομασθέντος Σκεντέρμπεη βασιλέως της Αλβανίας, μεταφρασθείσα εκ του Γαλλικού. Μετά προσθήκης του γεννεαλογικού καταλόγου των Οθωμανών Σουλτάνων, συνερανισθέντος παρά του σοφωτάτου Αρχιεπισκόπου Ευγενίου του Βουλγάρεως, Moscow 1812.*

² The research that followed this discovery led to the publication of a book including the edition of this new biography along with an extended introduction: Machi Paizi-Apostolopoulou, *Γεωργίου Καστριώτη, του επιλεγμένου Σκεντέρμπεη, Βίος και Πολιτεία. Μια αθησαύριστη βιογραφία στα ελληνικά*, Athens, NHRF, Institute of Neohellenic Research, 2018, 235 pp.

³ See Georges T. Pétrovitch, *Scanderbeg (Georges Castriota). Essai de bibliographie raisonnée; ouvrages sur Scanderbeg*, Paris 1881 (= *Beiträge zur Kenntnis Südosteuropas und des Nahen Orients*, III, Introduction F. Babinger, München, R. Trofenik, 1967; Amsterdam, B. R. Grüner, 1972).

Greek Revolution, which naturally led to a connection between the publication and the preparation for the Revolution. Indeed, this was confirmed when the Greek hero of the Greek Revolution Theodoros Kolokotronis asserted that he often read with admiration the achievements of Skanderbeg from this publication⁴. This work was not an original text compiled by a Greek, but a translation of a known work by the French Jesuit P. Duponcet, *Histoire de Scanderbeg Roy d'Albanie*, which had been published in Paris in 1709. The fact that the translator's name was not mentioned in the title page, nor anywhere else, led to the erroneous belief that the work was written by the Greek scholar Eugenios Voulgaris⁵. The reason was that a chronological list of Ottoman sultans compiled by Eugenios was appended to the book. All these facts have been analyzed by Titos Jochalas in his book on George Kastriotis, therefore I will not go into much detail⁶.

These were the established facts until a few years ago, when I was studying some manuscripts bequeathed to the library of the University of Ioannina by the metropolitan of Korytsa Eulogios Kourilas (1880-1961). Kourilas was an erudite prelate with a rich library and a special interest for Epirus⁷. His library included some manuscripts as well. Among them there was a voluminous manuscript (ms BK 5) with a modern binding, comprising 539 folia measuring 210X165mm, which contains 41 works about the history of the Ottomans.

I soon realized that this was a codex constituted by the Constantinopolitan scholar Nikolaos Karatzas, who was well known for his wide learning and his rich library. He was an official in the

⁴ Διήγησις συμβάντων της Ελληνικής Φυλής από τα 1770 έως τα 1836. Υπαγόρευσε Θεόδωρος Κωνσταντίνου Κολοκοτρώνης, Athens 1846, p. 49.

⁵ Greek scholar, theologian and philosopher, eminent orthodox educator, born in Corfu in 1716 died in St. Peterburg in 1806; see Stephen K. Batalden, *Catherine II's Greek Prelate: Eugenios Voulgaris in Russia, 1771–1806*, New York 1982; Daniel Stiermon, «Eugène Boulgaris», in C. G. Condicello & V. Condicello, ed., *La Theologie byzantine et sa tradition*, II, Turnhout 2002, p. 751-848 and the bibliography mentioned there.

⁶ Titos Jochalas, *Ο Γεώργιος Καστριώτης-Σκεντέρμπεης στα νεοελληνικά γράμματα*, Athens 2¹⁹⁹⁴, p. 27-39.

⁷ On Kourilas Archive and Library and the adventure until they were integrated in the University of Ioannina Library see Mary Zangli-Boziou, *Ευλόγιος Κουρίλας (1880-1961). Το Αρχείο του στο Πανεπιστήμιο Ιωαννίνων*, Ioannina 2009; D. G. Apostolopoulos, P. D. Mihailaris, Machi Paizi, «Ένα περιώνυμο νομικό χειρόγραφο που ελάνθανε: το “χειρόγραφον Γ, του Γερασίου Αργολίδος”». Ένας άγνωστος κώδικας του Νικολάου Καρατζά», *Ελληνικά* 45 (1995), 87-88.

principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia (“megas komisos”) and “logothetis of the genikon“ of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and divided his life between Wallachia and Constantinople⁸.

Some characteristics that are found in all of his known manuscripts, as well as the identification of his hand-writing, enabled me to attribute this manuscript to Karatzas.

Among the 41 works contained in the manuscript, I detected a text on f. 35^r, with the title: *Περί των αζίων και ενδόξων κατορθωμάτων Γεωργίου του Κρόγια, ελληνικά Καστριώτου, του επιλεγόμενου Σκεντέρμπεη, αυθέντου και ηγεμόνος Αλβανίας τε και Ηπείρου* («Regarding the worthy and glorious achievements of George of Croia, Kastriotis in Greek, the so-called Skanderbeg, master and ruler of Albania and Epirus»).

The text continues until f. 104^v and it covers 70 folia, i.e. 140 pages. On the two preceding folia 33-34 there are five notes with biographical information on Kastriotis, drawn from Greek sources. This is a practice often encountered in the manuscripts of Karatzas, which shows that he was not just a manuscript copyist, but also a eminent scholar.

Nowhere in the 140 pages containing the biography of Kastriotis is there any name stating who the author was.

The first thought was that perhaps Karatzas was the author, or even the translator. However, the examination of the manuscript, in combination with Karatzas' methods, known from other manuscripts of his, led me to reject this possibility. I will mention some indicative facts. In several parts of the text some words are missing, causing breaks in the flow of meaning. This fact rules out the possibility that Karatzas himself may have been the author. On the other hand, if we assume that Karatzas was the translator, his erudition would not allow him to leave gaps in his translation. But also some linguistic features distance us from such a possibility. Several words do not comply with his linguistic instinct (e.g. the use of the word *krotos* instead of *epeuphemia*-cheers). It is evident that Karatzas copied this text in his manuscript from a source unknown to us.

⁸ On Nikolaos Karatzas, eminent manuscript copyist and erudite philologist see Machi Paizi-Apostolopoulou, *Έλληνες λόγιοι του 18^{ου} αιώνα, αφανείς, άσημοι και διάσημοι, σε διασταυρούμενες τροχιές: Βαρνάβας ο Κύπριος, Δημήτριος Ραμαδάνης, Καισάριος Δαπόντες, Νικόλαος Καρατζάς*, Athens, NHRF, Center for Neohellenic Research, 2007, p. 137-163 and the recent bibliography mentioned in my book (see above note 2), p. 38 n. 28.

The search for this source led me to intricate pathways. Of course, my research started from the earliest published biography of George Kastriotis, the one compiled and published around 1510 by Marinus Barletius⁹. Yet, it was obvious that our text was not a Greek version of the work of Barletius: its subject matter was not divided into 13 chapters, but 40 and the flow of the narrative was not the same.

During my research into the printed biographies which saw the light after 1510 –it is known that most of them were based on the text of Barletius– I rejected those of Paolo Giovio and Andrea Gambini, since they have a similar title but different content¹⁰. However, I was halted by the anonymous biography published in 1540, whose author's name is given only between the lines of the dedicatory letter: it is Demetrius Francus and his work *Commentario de le cose de Turchi et del S. Georgio Scanderbeg, principe di Epyrro, con la sua vita, et le vittorie per lui fatte, con l'aiuto de l'altissimo Dio et le inestimabili forze et virtu di quello degne di memoria*, [Venice] 1540¹¹.

The subject matter of this book was divided into 42 chapters and the Greek text was to a large extent a rendering of Franco's Italian text. Yet, as I proceeded toward the last chapters, I detected several divergences, not only in the 1539/1540 edition, but also in the later editions of the same work. However, I realized to my surprise that the same divergences I detected in the Greek text were present in Giovanni Bonardo's edition of the book, printed in Venice in 1584. Bonardo reduced the number of chapters to 41 and stated that he made some interventions to the original publication, as well as some omissions, "some unnecessary babbling", as he characteristically noted in his preface. Perhaps this is the reason he also modified the original title of the work¹².

⁹ Marini Barletii Scodrensis, *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum Principis*, Rome [1506-1510].

¹⁰ Pavlo Iovio, vescovo di Nocera, *Commentario de le cose de Turchi*, Venice 1540 and Andrea Gambini, *Dele cose de Turchi, libri tre*, Venice 1541. At the last page is mentioned the name of the printer: In casa di maestro Bernardin Milanese.

¹¹ In the Library of the Hellenic Parliament I found a copy of the same book dated on 1539, having precisely the same contents with the one printed in 1540. In his book Pétrovitch (see note 1) did not mention either of those two similar editions.

¹² The title of Bonardo's edition is: *Gli illustri e gloriosi gesti et vittoriose imprese fatte contra Turchi, dal Sign. D. Giorgio Castriotto, detto Scanderbeg, prencipe d'Epyrro...*

The new title is closer to the title of the Greek translation. In addition, I realized that the parts omitted by Bonardo were missing from the Greek text as well.

However, other differences are discernible in the Greek text, mostly in those parts where the Italian version praises Venice and emphasizes the Catholic element. Here, in our text, these aspects have been omitted. One point is characteristic: according to the Greek text, when Kastriotis died, he gave his son the final instruction to follow the advice of his mother, of the dignitaries of the state, and of the archbishop of Dyrrachion Paul¹³. Instead, the Italian text informs us that the dying Kastriotis entrusted the supervision of his son to the archbishop Paul and to Venice. The lengthy praises for Venice which follow in the Italian text, are omitted in our text.

Nevertheless, I detected other parts that led me to Bonardo's 1584 edition. I will mention two of them.

The Greek text mentions a place name within Skanderbeg's realm, as «Τόπος των Νέων», i.e. the "Place of the Young". I turned to the Bonardo edition in search of this strange place name, where it is also referred as "loco di Giovenemi". I thought that this was the explanation: young – giovane, the Place of the young. However, such a place name does not exist in Albania, as far as I was able to check. So, how can this place name be explained? I found the answer in the original edition of Franco's work, the one from 1540: the place is mentioned there as Gionenemi, the place of Gion-Gjon, Gjonëmë, i.e. who was George Kastriotis' father, in the region of Mat¹⁴. Thus, the place name was erroneously reproduced in the 1584 edition and from there the corrupt form was transmitted to the Greek text.

Novamente ristampati e con somma diligenza corretti [dal Giovanni M. Bonardo], Venice, Presso Altobello Salicato, 1584.

¹³ Machi Paizi-Apostolopoulou, *Γεωργίου Καστριώτη, του επιλεγμένου Σκεντέρμπεη...*, p. 185-186, v. 3041-3060.

¹⁴ «... Scanderbeg Castriota, who was Lord of Dibra, Mat and Kruja down to the sea, and of Debrina, also called Randesio, and of the province of Guonimi (Gjonëm): *Brief Cronicle of Giovanni Musachi*, translated in English by Robert Elsie, *Texts and Documents of Albanian History*, http://www.albanianhistory.net/1515_Musachi/index.html; «These nine villages, according to the register in question, were located in the land of John (Yuvan-ili), that is to say they were part of John Kastrioti's property... of Skanderbeg's father's land»: Halil Inalcic, *From Empire to Republic. Essays on Ottoman and Turkish Social History*, Istanbul 1995, p. 77.

The second point is a passage describing how a soldier was wounded by a gun. Going back to the first editions of Franco's text, we can realize that the narrative is general, stating that the soldier was wounded in the abdomen, but there is no indication of what caused the wound. However, the 1584 edition reports that the wound was caused by "un'archibugiata"¹⁵, a gun that had appeared at that time in the West. The Greek translator apparently had the Italian text of 1584 in front of him, but was unable to find a Greek term for this new gun and therefore called it a "toufeki", a rifle.

One issue that remains unclear in the text of the Greek biography is Kastriotis' religious affiliation. Already from the beginning of his work Franco mentions that his father was Christian and takes every opportunity to present George as an ardent supporter of Christianity. However, it is not clear whether he was Catholic or Orthodox. I do not believe that his frequent contacts with the Pope necessarily reflect his creed –let's not forget that the Pope had armed forces and money, which Skanderbeg needed for his attacks. On the contrary, we have some indications that point toward Orthodoxy: the future patriarch of Constantinople Nephon II, together with the Athonite monk Zacharias remained for a while with him and Zacharias became his spiritual father. Besides, his brother Reposh and later his father John were buried in the Orthodox church of Hilandar on Mount Athos¹⁶.

When I dismissed the possibility that Karatzas may have been the author or translator of this new biography, the date of the work was confined between Bonardo's edition in 1584 and before the death of the copyist Nikolaos Karatzas in 1784. As for the person who translated Franco's work into Greek, some evidence I detected enabled me to formulate two possible scenarios.

First scenario. Karatzas incorporated into the manuscript we are studying a work titled: *Ιστορικόν του πολέμου των Τούρκων υπό κάτω εις το κάστρον της Βιέννας και της ήττης αυτών* («History of the war of the Turks at the Castle of Vienna and their defeat»), a work translated from Italian by Ieremias Kakavelas (ca. 1643-1698). Thus, Kakavelas' well attested knowledge of Italian, the related linguistic style, and his

¹⁵ *Gli illustri e gloriosi gesti...*, 1584 [Bonardo edition], p. 74^v.

¹⁶ Boško Bojović, «Mount Athos, Wallachian princes "Voyvodes", John Kastriotis, and the Albanian tower, a dependency of Hilandar», *Balkanica* 37 (2006), 85-86.

interest in emphasizing, highlighting the defeats of the Turks, may help us consider him as a possible translator of the biography of George Kastriotis. In this case, the Greek biography originates from the last decades of the 17th century – Kakavelas died in 1698¹⁷.

The second hypothesis –although not very plausible– regarding the translator and therefore the dating of the Greek translation, is connected with Russia's policy of seeking access to the Black Sea and from there to the Mediterranean, by encouraging the Balkan peoples to revolt against the Turks, a policy which had begun in the early 18th century and was intensified in the middle of the century with the Russo-Turkish war. Let us keep in mind that Voltaire, in order to support the propaganda of Catherine the Great in this matter, wrote around 1770 that figures such as Skanderbeg, who could lead an anti-Turkish rebellion, had disappeared from Europe¹⁸. Thus, if we connect the Greek translation with the need to make the biography of Skanderbeg known to the Greeks, we should date it around the middle of the 18th century and correlate it with the views of Catherine the Great for the expansion of Russia in the Balkan region.

The fact that Venice's role is omitted from the Greek text points to the same direction. As I mentioned earlier, the relevant passages in Franco's work are missing; this can be explained in view of Russia's plan to dominate the Balkans.

One more element leads us to date the translation to the period 1750-1770. Kaisarios Dapontes, a friend of Nikolaos Karatzas, known for his extensive work in verse, wrote in 1770 that he had read and admired the biography of George Kastriotis. In fact, he added the detail that he read it from a manuscript –which he describes– and not from a printed book¹⁹. Now we know that Dapontes was holding in his hands the

¹⁷ On Ieremias Kakavelas see D. Prokopiou, *Απαρίθμησις Λογίων Γραικών* in J. A. Fabricius, *Bibliotheca Graeca*, XI, Hamburg 1722, p. 787; G. Zaviras, *Νέα Ελλάς ή Ελληνικόν Θέατρον*, Athens 1872, p. 350; C. N. Sathas, *Βιογραφίαι των εν τοις γράμμασι διαλαμπνάντων Ελλήνων*, Athens 1868, p. 383-384.

¹⁸ «Si les empereurs grecs avaient été des Scanderbeg, l'empire d'Orient se serait conservé»; *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations. Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, v. 24, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2011, Chapitre 91, p. 395-396.

¹⁹ In his unpublished work «Γεωγραφική Ιστορία» he wrote that he had a rare manuscript written "by hand", describing the glorious achievements and the life of Kastriotis and he expressed the wish "If only someone would have it printed for his soul" (...έχω και το βιβλίο δε

manuscript including the biography of Kastriote, the manuscript of Karatzas preserved now in the University of Ioannina Library. Indeed, I used as a motto in my book one of Dapontes verses mentioned above: «If only someone would have it printed for his soul». I responded to Daponte's wish by publishing the unknown biography of Skanderbeg, of course not to save my soul, but to add one more biography to the already long list of biographies known so far²⁰.

των ανδραγαθιών του | των γενομένων παρ' αυτού εως τον θάνατόν του, | χειρίσιον, δυσεύρετον, με όλην την ζωήν του, | αχ! και να το ετύπωνεν ένας για την ψυχήν του).

²⁰ See above, note 2.