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**THE APPROPRIATION OF SKANDERBEG BY BALKAN
HISTORIOGRAPHIES
- THE {MIS}USE OF HISTORICAL SOURCES -**

George Kastriot Skanderbeg is well-known World figure. In the Middle Ages he was the undisputed leader in the struggle against Ottomans not only in the territories of present-day Albania and north-western parts of Macedonia but throughout the Balkans and even wider at least in Italy and Vatican.

With this in mind, the huge interest in modern historiography for this striking person is not surprising at all. What is surprising is the attempt by some researchers especially in the Balkans to overlook significant deeds of Skanderbeg and reduce it to his appropriation.

The appropriation of Skanderbeg by Balkan historiographies is mainly made on two grounds: religious and ethnic one. The former is less exposed while the latter is more exploited.

In the *Religious appropriation* of Skanderbeg pre-dominates the position of his struggle in the name of Christianity. But here, there is a new split that refers to whether Skanderbeg led his struggle from the position of an Orthodox or a Catholic Christianity.

Based on the sources, historical facts going to two directions:

a.) Skanderbeg's father John (in original Јован / Иван, as John Musaki¹, Marinus Barletius² and Konstantin Mihailovich from

¹ Ch.Hopf, Chroniques greco-romanes inedites ou peu conue publie avec notes et tables genealogique, Berlin 1873, pp. 295, 301. Also see Albanian translation: Gjon Muzaka, Memorje. Përktheu: Dhori Qiriaz, Tiranë 1996, p. 44.

² In this article we use Zagreb's edition of Barletius book from 1743: Marino Barletio, Vita et res praeclare gestae christi athletae Georgius Castrioti Epirotatum Principis, Zagrabiae 1743, liber I, p. 1. French translation: Histoire de Scanderbeg, Roy d'Albanie, Paris 1709, p. 6; Albanian translation: Marin Barleti Shkodran, Historia e jetës dhe e veprave të Skenderbeut, Tiranë, 1964, p. 50; Macedonian translation: Марин Барлети, Скендербег – Животот и делата на епирскиот владетел, превод од латински и белешки на В.Димовска и

Ostrovica³ recording), probably born as an Orthodox Christian, in 1426 issued a Charter to the Serbian orthodox monastery of Chilandar at Holy Month Athos, donating lands and goods spread in the today's R.N.Macedonia Debar region, among others two villages: Radostushe (in original Радостуше) with the local church of the Holy Mother of God and Trebishe (in original Требиште)⁴, tower (pirg)⁵ and burial place (it became for Reposh after his dead in 1431)⁶;

b.) Few years after the beginning of the struggle⁷, Skanderbeg addressed Naples king Alfonso for help and he sent his regiment to Kroia (according to the Treaty of Gaeta from 26 March 1451 Skanderbeg de jure recognize sovereignty of the Kingdom of Naples⁸ but de facto remained pretty much independent in his activities). In this sense, one should have in mind that Skanderbeg intended to travel to Italy personally to meet Naples king Alfonso V and the pope Nicholas V⁹. Soon after, the next pope Callixtus III on 27 December 1457

Љ.Басотова со историски белешки од проф. К.Аџиевски (Marin Barleti, Skanderbeg – Life and Deeds of Epirus Ruler, translation from Latin and notes by V.Dimovska and Lj.Basotova, with historical notes by prof. K.Adzievski), Скопје (Skopje) 2008, p. 28. About it in more details see Z.Mirdita, Mbi botimin e “Historisë së Skënderbeut” të Marin Barletit në Zagreb më 1743, in: Simpozijum o Skenderbegu (9-12 maja 1968), (Symposium on Skanderbeg), Priština 1969, pp. 415-422.

³ Константин Михаилович из Островице, Јаничарове успомене или турска хроника-приредил и превел Ђ.Живановић (Constantine Mihailovich from Ostrovica, Janissary Memories or Turkish Chronicle-edited and translate by Gj.Zhivanovich), Београд (Beograd) 1986, p. 138.

⁴ С.Новаковић, Законски споменици српских владара средњег века (S.Novakovich, Legal monuments of Serbian rulers in the Middle Ages), СКА Београд (Beograd) 1912, pp. 467-468; B. Korabiev, Actes de l'Athos V. Actes slaves de Chilandar, Vizantiskii Vremennik 19 (1915), No. 82 I, p. 27. Cf. Б.Петровски, Историја на Балканските земји во XIV-XV век (B.Petrovski, History of the Balkans Lands in XIV-XV Century), Скопје (Skopje) 2010, p. 189. Also see J.V.A.Fine, Jr, The late medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest, Michigan 1996, p. 415.

⁵ B.Bojović, Mont Athos, les princes roumains, Jean Castriot et la Tour albanaise (Arbanaški pirg) dependance de Chilandar, Balcanica 37 (2006), pp. 82, 84-86.

⁶ М.Спремић, Деспот Ђурађ Бранковић и његово доба (M.Spremich, Despot Djuragj Brankovich and His Time), Београд (Beograd) 1994, p. 286.

⁷ League of Lezhe (1444) has no impact on Skanderbeg's religious affiliation since he had already rejected Islam by then.

⁸ That can be seen explicitly from the Letter to Milano's dux Francesco Sforza from 1456 in which Skanderbeg address himself as vassal and captain of the king of Naples, cf. F.Pall, I rapporti italo-albanesi alla meta del secolo XV. Archivio storico per le provincie Napoletane seria III, 4(1965), No. 4, pp. 123-226.

⁹ C.Marinesco, Alphonse V, roi d'Aragon at de Naples, et l'Albanie de Scanderbeg, Melange de l'Ecole roumaine en France, I (1923), pp. 69-79.

declared Skanderbeg as Captain-General of the Curia in the war against the Ottomans and give him the title “Athleta Christy” namely Champion of Christ¹⁰. Skanderbeg was also enrolled in the plans of the next pope Pius II who intended to grant him position of General of the Crusaders in the planned Crusade in 1463/64¹¹.

Of course, in the meanwhile, namely the period when George Kastriot was sent to the Ottoman court in Adrianople and embraced Islam, he took the Muslim name Iskender - after the great world-known conqueror Alexander of Macedon¹².

One should bear in mind that after his death Skanderbeg was buried in the church of Shën Kol (Saint Nikolas) in Lezhe – Skanderbeg’s mausoleum today.

The *Ethnic appropriation* of Skanderbeg

In the Western Historiography there are different opinions about ethnic origin of Skanderbeg although undoubtedly predominates the position of Albanian followed by Kosovar historiography for his Albanian ethnic origin¹³. But there are a significant number of researchers who hold a position of his semi Slavic origin¹⁴, also of

¹⁰ Parrino, *Acta Albaniae Vaticana res Albaniae saeculorum XIV et XV atque cruciatam spectantia*, Vol I, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican 1971, No. 260. Cf. F.Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His time*, Princeton 1992 (Reprint Edition), pp. 152-153.

¹¹ O.J.Schmitt, *Skanderbeg: Der neue Alexander auf dem Balkans*, Regensburg 2009, pp. 243-256.

¹² e.g. of Epirus, according to Marinus Barletius, cf. Marino Barletio, *Vita et res praeclare gestae christi athletae Georgius Castrioti Epirotatum Principis*, Zagrabiae 1743; and in modern historiography is seen as New Alexander of the Balkans, cf.: D.Egro, *Skënderbej: identitet i ndryshuar apo titullature turco-osmane*, in: *Skënderbeu dhe Evropa*, Tiranë 2006, pp. 113-124; O.J.Schmitt, *Skanderbeg: Der neue Alexander auf dem Balkans*, Regensburg 2009. Cf. D.M.Nicol, *The Last centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*. Second edition, Cambridge 1999, pp. 361-362.

¹³ B.J.Fischer, *Albanian Nationalism and Albanian Independence*, SEEU Review 10/1 (2014), pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ Cf. H.Sauer-Nordendorf, *Skenderbeg und die Europäische politik in seinem Jahrhundert*, in: *Simpozijum o Skenderbegu*, 9-12 maja 1968 (Symposium on Skanderbeg), Priština 1969, p. 46, who stands for Serbian origin of Skanderbeg’s mother. The same position also in O.J.Schmitt, *Skanderbeg et les sultans: anatomie d’une rébellion contre l’Empire ottoman*, *Turcica* 43 (2011), pp. 65, 78.

Serbian origin¹⁵ and some of them are not even that explicit in their positions.

The list of Albanian researchers that have this claim is really very long and here I am going to name only few of them during the last almost one and a half century - from late 19th throughout 20th until early 21 Century: F.Konica¹⁶, F.Noli¹⁷, A.Gegai¹⁸, K.Fraseri¹⁹, S.Skendi²⁰, S.Biçoku²¹, P.Xhufi²², having in mind that there are diametrically opposite and even radical ones²³. Among today's Kosovo researchers one of the most agile on this issue is A.Berishaj²⁴.

No less ambitious is also Serbian historiography trying to impose its truth on Skanderbeg's Serbian ethnic origin. During the 20th century the most prominent among Serbian researchers are R.Grujich²⁵, J.Radonich²⁶, S.Cirkovich²⁷, M.Spremich²⁸, B.Bojovich²⁹.

¹⁵ J.G.Hahn, *Reise durch die Gefilde des Drin und Wardar im Auftrage der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften unternommen im Jahre 1863*, pp. 115-116, who indicates the full Serbian origin of Scanderbeg.

¹⁶ F.Konica, *Albania*, Brussels 1898.

¹⁷ F.S.Noli, *George Castrioti Scanderbeg (1405-1468)*, Madison 1947.

¹⁸ A. Gegai, *L' Albanie et l' invasion turque au XV-e siècle*, Paris 1937.

¹⁹ K.Fraseri, *Gergj Kastrioti-Skënderbeu (1405-1468)*, Tiranë 1962 (also see adequate chapters in: *Historia e Shqipërisë, Vëllim i parë*, Tiranë 1959; *Histoire de l'Albanie. Des origines à nos jours*, Sous la direction de S.Pollo et A.Puto avec la collaboration de K. Fraseri, Lyon 1974 (= S.Pollo-A.Puto, *The History of Albania. From its origins to the present day*, with the collaboration of Kristo Fraseri and Skender Anamali; English translation by Carol Wiseman and Ginnie Hole, London 1981)).

²⁰ S.Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878-1912*, Princeton 1967.

²¹ K.Biçoku, *Skënderbeu dhe Shqipëria në kohën e tij*, Tiranë 2005.

²² P.Xhufi, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, vëllimi I (Lashtësia dhe Mesjeta)*, Tiranë 2002; *Dilemat e Arbërit. Studime mbi Shqipërinë mesjetare*, Tiranë, 2006.

²³ O.Jazexhi, *Edukimi me Skënderbeun*, Hikmet, No. 1 (2013), Prishtina, pp. 83-109.

²⁴ Cf. the latest publication of his in this particular publication: A.Berishaj, *Gjergj Kastrioti-Skanderbeg according to some Yugoslav sources*, in: *George Castrioti Skanderbeg, his Lifetime and his Legacy in History*, Tiranë 2019.

²⁵ Р.Грујић, *Светогорски азили за српске владаноце и властелу после Косовске битке (R.Grujich, Mount Athos asylum for the Serbian Rulers and Nobles after the Battle of Kosovo)*, ГСНД (GSND) XI/5 (1931), p. 81.

²⁶ Ј.Радонић, *Ђурађ Кастриот Скендербег и Арбанија у XV веку (J.Radonich, Djuragj Kastriot Skenderbeg and Arbania in XV Century)*, Споменик СКА (Spomenik SKA) XCV 74, Београд (Beograd) 1942, pp. 1-2.

²⁷ С.Ћирковић, *Ђурађ Кастриот Скендербег и Босна (S.Cirkovich, Djuragj Kastriot Skenderbeg and Bosnia)*, in: *Simpozijum o Skenderbegu, 9-12 maja 1968 (Symposium on Skanderbeg)*, Priština 1969.

²⁸ М.Спремић, *Деспот Ђурађ Бранковић и његово доба (M.Spremich, Despot Djuragj Brankovich and His Time)*, Београд (Beograd) 1994.

The Montenegrin historiography is also associated with this issue emphasizing the Serbian origin of Skanderbeg's mother (at least Serbian oriented ones³⁰). Bulgarian historiography does not lag behind in determining Skanderbeg's ethnic origin where the opinion that he has at least partial Bulgarian origin is quite common³¹.

More recently, certain researchers expose the thought about the full Macedonian origin of Skanderbeg, such as: R.Ivanovski³², P.Popovski³³. Certainly, here I do not list the source-based argumentative positions in the Macedonian historiography about his partly Slavic origins, unequivocally by the mother's bloodline. This position is acceptable at least for the following researchers: Lj.Basotova³⁴, S.Zogovich³⁵, M.Bislimi³⁶, B.Petrovski³⁷, V.Dimovska-Lj.Basotova-K.Adzievski³⁸.

²⁹ B.Bojović, Mont Athos, les princes roumains, Jean Castriot et la Tour albanaise (Arbanaški pirg) dependance de Chilandar, *Balkanica* 37 (2006), pp. 81-87.

³⁰ Ѓ.Слијепчевић, Српско-арбанашки односи кроз векове са посебним освртом на новије време (Ѓ.Slijepcevič, Serbo-arbanach relations throughout centuries with particular reference to Modern Time), Минхен (Munich) 1974, pp. 45-47.

³¹ С.Димитров, Георги Кастриот Скендербег и неговата ослободителна борба (S.Dimitrov, George Castriot Skanderbeg and His Liberation Struggle), in: Г.К.Скендербег (G.K.Skanderbeg) 1468-1968, БАН Софија (BAN Sofia) 1970, сп. Балкани (journal Balkans), p. 11.

³² Р.Ивановски, Нов Александар Македонски (R.Ivanovski, New Alexander of Macedonia), Битола (Bitola) 2003.

³³ П.Поповски, Мијациите: потомци на античките Македонци и прастари жители на Матија-денешна Албанија (P.Popovski, Miyaks: descendants of ancient Macedonians and ancient inhabitants of Matija-present day Albania), Галичник (Galichnik) 2006.

³⁴ Љ.Басотова, Нашите краишта и луѓе во биографијата на Скендербег од Марин Барлети (Lj.Basotova, Our Regions and People in Skanderbeg's Biography of Marinus Barletius), *Историја* (journal History) 10/1 (1974), pp. 295-307.

³⁵ Љ.Басотова-С.Зоговиќ, Марин Барлети о учешћу македонског становништва у Скендербеговим борбама против Турака, (Lj.Basotova-S.Zogovich, Marinus Barletius on Macedonian population's participation in Skanderbeg battles against Turks), in: Становништво словенског поријекла у Албанији, Зборник радова са меѓународног скупа одржаног у Цетињу 21, 22 и 23. Јуна 1990 (Inhabitants of Slavic origins in Albania-Proceedings of International gathering held in Cetinje on 21, 22 and 23 June 1990), Титоград (Titograd) 1991, p. 692 note 12 and note 14 on p. 693.

³⁶ М.Бислими, Борбите на Скендер-бег со Османлиите, со посебен осврт на Македонија (M.Bislimi, Skanderbeg's Struggle with the Ottomans, with particular reference to Macedonia), Скопје (Skopje) 2001, p. 52 note 68.

³⁷ Б.Петровски (B.Petrovski), Voisava Tribalda, in: *Ѓепј Кастриоту Скендербег (1405-1468)*. Материјали од научниот собир по повод 600 години од неговото раѓање, одржан во Скопје на 25 и 26 ноември 2005 (Gjergj Kastriot Skanderbeg (1405-1468) – Materials

In this sense, it remains only Greek (or Greek oriented) historiography to point out that Skanderbeg has Greek origin³⁹.

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*The use – misuse (abuse!) of historical sources*⁴⁰

All researchers point out that they built their views on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the sources. Therefore, although there are different perspectives to look at this issue, some of the researchers consider their opinion to be scientifically based and hence it should be as broadly as possible accepted. Accordingly, any other opinion on these issues could be regarded as an abuse of historical sources and hence a deliberate provocation.

Thus the possibility of having another view is excluded. With this, the possibility to accept different truth from the personally imagined one is closed.

The appropriation of this very important historical figure as undoubtedly Skanderbeg is by the Modern Balkan historiographies leads primarily to ethnic intolerance in the region.

Because of that, it is not easy at all to defend the position of pure religious affiliation or mono-ethnic origin of Skanderbeg even when historical facts would suggest it.

from the Scientific gathering to mark the 600 years since his birth, held in Skopje 25-26 November 2005), Скопје (Skopje) 2006, pp. 67-78.

³⁸ Марин Барлети, Скендербег – Животот и делата на епирскиот владетел, превод од латински и белешки на В.Димовска и Љ.Басотова со историски белешки од проф. К.Адијевски (Marin Barleti, Skanderbeg – Life and Deeds of Epirus Ruler, translation from Latin and notes by V.Dimovska and Lj.Basotova, with historical notes by prof. K.Adzievski), Скопје (Skopje) 2008, p. 28 note 6.

³⁹ In this sense recently (on April 22, 2018) on the one of the National Concession television in R.N.Macedonia – the show “In the center”, O.Jazehxi, who claims that he hold a doctorate on “The Albanian Nationalism” at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy (current employee of A.Moisiu University in Durres cf.), states that “Skanderbeg is Serbo-bulgarian fighter who’s family with the surname Kastrioti shows that he had Greek roots” and according to O.Jazehxi “the historical documents show that Skanderbeg was not Albanian”.

⁴⁰ In this context, I do not intend to leave any room at all for the numerous attempts to politicize Skanderbeg by non-historians for populist purposes.

From the other hand, one should not forget that in the Middle Ages Albano-Slavic antagonism actually does not exist⁴¹ since both – Albanian and Slavic nobles were part of same state or at least same influence for a long period of time, namely Byzantium and Byzantine Commonwealth (oikumena)⁴².

The very sources clearly testify to Skanderbeg's *religious variability* rather than ambiguity but also to his *diffuse ethnic origin*. Namely, facts can not be neglected and some of the most significant ones for our topic are the follow:

- although involuntarily and unwillingly, he became a Muslim accepting name Iskender, and as a Muslim soldier fought as part of the Ottoman army by conquering Christian territories until 1443;
- he used a favorable opportunity and rebelled, after which he converted to Christianity again from 1443 onward (although it is not clear whether we converted in Orthodoxy or Catholicism - which is most likely after 1451);
- from the Pope Callixtus III is called *Athleta Christi* and Pope Pius II intended to grant him position of General of the Crusaders in the planned Crusade in 1463/64.
- his mother called Voisava was of Slavic gender originated of noble family from the region of Polog in northwest Macedonia;
- his father John donated hereditary properties near Debar to the Serbian monastery Chilandar on the Mount Athos (1426): He also bought some real estate there (after 1428).
- his brother Reposh died and was buried there (in 1431)
- Skanderbeg is buried in St. Nicolas church in Lezhe (built in 1459 on the remains of older 14th century church) (later on kishë-xhami, Selimiye mosque)

⁴¹ О.Ј.Шмит, Скендербег-елементи за реинтерпретација (O.J.Sscmitt, Skanderbeg-elements for reinterpretation), in: *Ѓерѓ Кастриоти Скендербег (1405-1468)*. Материјали од научниот собир по повод 600 години од неговото раѓање, одржан во Скопје на 25 и 26 ноември 2005 (Gjergj Kastriot Skanderbeg (1405-1468) – Materials from the Scientific gathering to mark the 600 years since his birth, held in Skopje 25-26 November 2005), Скопје (Skopje) 2006, p. 33; Д.Ѓорѓијев, Населението во македонско-албанскиот граничен појас (XV-XVI век) (D.Gjorgjiev, The inhabitants in the Macedonian-albanian border zone), Скопје (Skopje) 2009.

⁴² D.Obolenski, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, New York 1971.

- his struggle was continued by his supporters (Venetian appointed Ivan Strez Balsha/ich as a Skanderbeg's successor and the Leader of rebellion-1469), and later on by his son John Kastriot II who returned from Italy (1481-84) (after that he married Jerina Brankovich, the daughter of despot Lazar Brankovich) and his grandson George Kastriot II (1501 in Lezhe);

- his biographer Barletius called him Skender – according to Alexander the Great because of his famous exploits.

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Skanderbeg actually fought for his country and for his own possession, as well as for the people who lived there to get rid of foreign power. He was a very pragmatic person and in that unequal struggle, every same-minded person was welcomed as an ally. That is why he demanded support among the rival Albanian clans, hence in his immediate neighborhood, but also from the relevant external factors such as the most important spiritual authority - the Pope, the nearest military power - the Neapolitan kingdom, and the crafty, always bussiness-oriented Venetians.

Confronting Skanderbeg with the frightening Ottoman sultans, in fact one of the greatest and most significant - Murat II and Mehmed the Conqueror, has not only glorified him for his time, but as such famous historical person he continued to live long time after his death in the following centuries until today.

Hence, the Desire, rather than the Historical Reality, of some historians in the modern historiography of the appropriation of Skanderbeg should not be astonished at all. What should be strikingly is *the ease of* which some historians neglect their social responsibility in making certain conclusions that not only suffer from subjectivism but can not withstand scientific criticism as well and therefore they run the risk of entering the sphere of quasi-historians.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, Skanderbeg was much more than to be addressed today simply according to his religion or ethnicity.

In his 25-year long struggle against the Ottomans Skanderbeg grew up from a small local rebel to an European leader. Namely, he appeared as a local rebel in central Albania and western Macedonia (firstly Debar, but not less Polog and also Ohrid-Struga region), gaining immediate support from most of the local nobles (the League in Lezhe – 01.03.1444), but also the benevolence of the local population.

Very soon, he grows as important Balkan fighter against the common enemy (namely making coalitions with top figures from Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia as well as making significant relations with Dubrovnik) and won the confidence of the West expressed in support of Venice, Naples and the Papacy.

Even more, Skanderbeg was seen from the West as a *fighter for Christianity* (especially after the fall of Constantinople 1453 he was seen as the last Christian hero⁴³) and *New Alexander* who (according to the Letter probably of the archbishop of Duress Paul Angelus from around 1460) is to be The One (the Leader – to led the way) that will expel the Asians (Ottomans) from Europe.

⁴³ D.M.Nicol, *The Last centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*. Second edition, Cambridge 1999, p. 393.