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KOSOVA AND THE ETHNIC TERRITORIES OF THE  
FORMER YUGOSLAVIA IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The history of the Albanians of the early Middle Ages is a continuation of the history of the Illyrians of late antiquity. The Albanians, as descendants of the Illyrians, inhabited the same areas and inherited from the Illyrians their language and material and spiritual culture. This holds true of all the Albanian-inhabited regions, including Kosova and the other Albanian territories in what was Yugoslavia. In late antiquity, Kosova was included in the province of Dardania, which included such important cities as Naisus, Ulpiana, and Shkup. The regions of Tetove, Gostivar, Kercove, Struge, and Oher belonged to the province of New Epirus, while the Albanian areas in modern Montenegro were included in the province of Prevalitana. The sixth-century writer Procopius of Caesaraea, in his book "On Building", writes that the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who was of Illyrian origin, built eight castles and rebuilt 61 others in Dardania alone. Archaeological excavations confirm Procopius' data. The presence of a relatively large number of "cities" or castles belonging to the indigenous Dardanian population is a characteristic of Kosova in late antiquity. Emil Cerskov, one of the first archaeologists to conduct excavations in Kosova, has counted about 100 such citadels. His excavations have shown that these castles are directly linked with the Dardanians and that some of them, situated near mining centers, had very ancient origins, surviving from antiquity through the Middle Ages, always inhabited by the indigenous population<sup>1</sup>. Among the most interesting are the fortified citadels of late antiquity discovered in the area of Drenice. A board of Byzantine coins, half-folis and decanumia of the sixth century, was found in the "citadel" of Strofc, and another site produced iron arrowheads from the castle of Llapushnik, belonging to the sixth and seventh centuries<sup>2</sup>. Ancient and mediaeval castles were also discovered in the Shkup area<sup>3</sup>.

The archaeological discoveries from late antiquity in Kosova, although still relatively small, show clearly that this area, as earlier, shared a common material and spiritual culture with the other southern Illyrian regions. This is evident from handicrafts such as ceramics, jewellery, and from architectural styles. This means that the province of Dardania responded to Roman and Byzantine influences in the same way as the other southern Illyrian provinces inhabited by the Albanians today. "Romanization", neither in the provinces of Prevalitana, New Epirus, nor in Old Epirus did not lead to the disappearance of language and culture, nor to the assimilation of the populace, even though new elements were introduced following intensive contacts with provincial Roman and Byzantine culture. As an example of Dardanian stubbornness, we may mention the discovery in the Upper Mezia province of the north of Dardania of two interesting Latin inscriptions. The first inscription states that

this gravestone has been erected to the memory of Young Dasian, whose parents were Old Dasian and Gala. The second inscription refers to a village called Dasa in

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the vicinity of Ulpiana. Both inscriptions have been dated to the fifth or sixth centuries<sup>4</sup>. We thus have inhabitants with Illyrian names in this century and even a village preserving the ancient name of Dardan.

Like other Albanian-inhabited regions, Kosova was very little affected by the large Avaro-Slav migrations of the sixth and seventh centuries. These migrations, starting from the Danube crossing by Singidunum (today's Belgrade), mainly headed for the shores of the Black Sea, Thrace, and eventually Constantinople<sup>5</sup>. Smaller numbers passed down the route via the Morava and Vardar valleys to reach Salonika<sup>6</sup>, and only isolated groups penetrated the western regions. It is known that after the Slav invasions a number of so-called *sklavinishe* were created. This is the name used in Byzantine sources for the areas occupied by the Slavs about the middle of the seventh century, over which Byzantium had no power. One Byzantine source, the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, describes the *sklavinishe* created in Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, and as far as the Peloponnesus in Greece<sup>7</sup>, while saying nothing about Dardania, Prevalitana, New Epirus, and Old Epirus. One historical fact concerning the central Balkans is worth noting here: the neighbours of the Dardanians, the Autaristi, Tribali, and Myzi, like the Scordiscians, were reduced to insignificance, and later disappeared. In contrast, the Dardanians continued their uninterrupted existence, and entered the Middle Ages quite normally as an indigenous population. It is worth mentioning here

the view of the well-known researcher Fanulla Papazoglu, who ends an article about the Illyrian and Dardanian kings as follows: "In conclusion, Dardania is evidently one of the least Romanized Balkan provinces. It seems that its population retained its individuality and ethnic awareness better than elsewhere. Signs of an ethnic awareness are visible in the dedications *Dea Dardania-s Deus Andinus*, and in the fact that the province's population retained their own names until late antiquity. In fact, in contrast to the appellation *Illyrios*, the names *Dardanus* or *Dardana*, attached to a name, are evident in inscriptions of the imperial period. An inscription from Rome has preserved the explicit formula *nat(ione) Dardanus*. One cannot exclude the possibility that the Dardanians were spared Romanization, survived the Slav migrations, and emerged in the Middle Ages with the name of Albanians"<sup>8</sup>.

The results of archaeological research are highly significant for the indigenous inhabitants of the province of Prevalitana, and especially the areas of Montenegro: "Not only is there no evidence of the Slav' period in the cities of Dukle, but no Slav settlement or necropolis has been found anywhere in Montenegro, with the probable exception of the mixed necropolis of Mijela near Virpazar on Lake Shkoder". It also emerges that "the so-called first Slav colonization left no trace on the urban life of Dukle. After the second colonization in the ninth century, the newcomers began a power struggle for control of the Roman and Byzantine cities"<sup>9</sup>. Here we may correct the first assertion about the necropolis of Mijela, which has shown to bear a direct connection to the Arberian culture of Koman, and does not suggest any mixture of Illyrian-Albanian and Slav culture<sup>10</sup>. As for the inhabitants of the regions of Tetove, Gostivar, Struge, and Oher they formed part of the province of New Epirus, and obviously lived through all the events affecting this province at the time when the Albanian people and their language were being formed at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Linguists have also reached a similar conclusion, showing that place names

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linked with the first wave of Slav migration into the Albanian-inhabited areas are very rare, as is evident in maps showing their distribution<sup>11</sup>. It is worth recalling here the conclusions reached by the well-known linguist Eqrem Çabej in connection with the continuity of a range of important Illyrian place names down to the present day over a wide territory including Kosova and the ethnic Albanian lands in the former Yugoslavia<sup>12</sup>.

In Kosova and these lands too, life in the early Middle Ages continued uninterrupted for the inhabitants, who are descendants of the ancient Illyrians and at this time began to be known by the early Albanian name of Arber and Arberesh. Many of the small towns of late antiquity survived, and many examples can be cited from the region of Drenice. A reconnaissance expedition by a group of archaeologists from the Republic of Albania in 1980, including the author of this article, visited the castles of Verbovc and Kasmac. Superficial examination showed that the surrounding walls of these castles, even though ruined, were similar in their construction to those of other Illyrian-Albanian castles of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The same was also true of the castle of Zvecan near Mitrovice that guarded the great mining center of Trepca and played a major role in the 12th century struggle of Byzantium against the Serbs<sup>13</sup>. Many ceramic fragments from this time survive on the surface of the area of this castle, as in many castles of the wide territory of Arberia. Mediaeval castles connected with the indigenous population that have been excavated include those of Prizren and nearby Zym. Excavations at Prizren have found traces of ancient fortifications that formed the basis of later mediaeval settlements, while ceramics found at Zym date back to the seventh-12th centuries and are similar to those found in adjacent regions of what is now the state of Albania<sup>14</sup>.

Several early mediaeval burial grounds that have been excavated in Kosova and other ethnic areas of the former Yugoslavia also testify to an indigenous culture connected to the well-known "Koman culture" of Arberia. These burial grounds are scattered over a large area covering the provinces of Prevalitana, Dardania, and New Epirus. The remains of the Koman culture found in Kukës district, which belonged to western Dardania, and the Arberian necropolises of Mijela in Montenegro and Oher in Macedonia are now well known<sup>15</sup>. The discovery of this culture in Kukës district is clear proof that the territory of Dardania in the early Middle Ages experienced the same development of material and spiritual culture as the other regions of our country. However, it must be said that there is some truth in the view advanced many years ago that "the lack of material remnants [of the Koman culture] in the provinces of

Macedonia and Dardania seems to be due to the relative lack of excavation work"<sup>16</sup>.

The burial ground of Vermice near Prizren, first used in the first century A.D. but more intensively between the ninth and 11th century, also belongs to the indigenous Albanian population. The catalogue of items found in the early mediaeval burial ground of Vermice and exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Prizren in 1980 but as far as we know still unpublished shows items familiar from other sites, such as circlets, earrings, and bronze rings. Two facts are worth noting concerning this burial ground: First, the archaeological finds are similar to those of other contemporary burial grounds of the same period in other Albanian territories. Second, anthropologists conclude from a study of parts of skeletons from Vermice that the population was of the Dinaric-Mediterranean type, i.e. Albanian, as has been found

elsewhere in our country<sup>17</sup>. The burial ground of Matican near Prishtina, which also contained luxury jewellery such as silver filigree and granulated earrings and rings<sup>18</sup>, belongs to the 9th-11th centuries, a period of Byzantine rule in the Balkans. It has been proved that earrings and rings like those of Matican are not the product of a new or Slav culture but are Byzantine silverwork widespread in the Balkan area and often connected with the indigenous population. The bracelets, earrings, and rings discovered in the first excavations of an Illyrian tumulus in the village of Llashtice near Gjilan<sup>19</sup> also belong to the early mediaeval Balkan culture of the indigenous Albanian population of the 10th - 12th centuries.

Thus, the early mediaeval items discovered in Kosova lead us to the logical conclusion that they belong to an indigenous Albanian population, direct descendants of the ancient inhabitants, for whom historical sources still for a time used the imperial and administrative term of Byzantine-Roman.

The Serbian state of Raska began to expand in Kosova and the other Albanian-inhabited areas in the 12th century. The Albanians, who had long ago formed themselves into a people in their own right spread over a large geographical area, had emerged on the Balkan political stage with their own ethnic consciousness, in order to embark on a long period of self-affirmation and struggle to achieve national unity.

1 E. Cerskov, *Rimiljani na Kosovu i Metohiji*, Beograd, 1969, p.32.

2 M. Pirraku, *Ndihmesë për hartën arkeologjike të pjesës qendrore të Kosovës*, in: "Onomastika e Kosovës", Symposium held on February 25-27, 1977, Prishtina, 1979, p.469, 518.

3 I. Mikulic, *Staro Skopje so okólnite trdvini; Skopje und Umgebende Festungen in der Antike und der Mittelalter*, Shkup, 1982.

4 J. Kovacevic, *Stoveni e staro balkansko stanovistvo*, Material IX, in: "Simposium srednovekovne sekcije arheoloskog drustva Jugoslavije, Prilep, 1970", Beograd, 1972, p.65.

5 P. Lemerle, *Invasions et migrations dans les Balkans depuis la fin de l'époque Romaine jusqu'au VIIIe siècle*, in: "Revue Historique", 78, 1954, p.294.

6 Seë: *Povijesni atlas za osnovu skolu*, Zagreb, 1980, harta, "Seoba slavena na jug", p.9.

According to this map, although the area of the modern Republic of Albania is shown inhabited by Albanians, Kosova and part of Macedonia is inhabited by a Roman population(!).

7 *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, Lib.2, I, 158.

8 F. Papazoglu, *Ilirska i dardanska kraljevina*, in: "Iliri i Albanci", Beograd, 1988, p.169 and p.199 (French version).

9 P. Miovic, *Problemi isledovanja slavjanskih gorodov v Cernogorii*, in: "Rapports du IIIe Congrès International d'Archeologie Slave", Tome 2, Bratislava, 1980, p.274.

10 S. Anamali, *Ilirët dhe shqiptarët*, in: "Iliria", 1990, I, p.1519.

11 I. Gjinari, *Dëshmi të historisë së gjuhës shqipe për kohën dhe vendin e formimit të popullit shqiptar*, in: "Konferenca kombëtare për formimin e popullit shqiptar, të gjuhës dhe të kulturës së tij", Tirana, 1988, pp.215-223, harta N.1.

12 E. Çabej, *Problemi i autoktonisë së shqiptarëve në dritën e emrave të*

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*vendeve*, Buletini i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës. Seria e Shkencave Shoqërore. 1985, N.2, p.54-62.

13 *Pesëdhjetë shekuj të Mitrovicës*, in: "E kaluara historike", Mitrovicë, 1971, p.6.

14 E. Shukriu -Hoti, *Kërkime arkeologjike përgjatë rrjedhjes së poshtme të Drinit të Bardhë*, in: "Iliria", VII-VIII, 1978-1979, pp.189-200.

15 O.Velimirovic-Zizic, *Mijeje, Vir Pazar ranosrednjovekovna nekropola*, in: "Arheoloski Pregled", 1966, 8, p.155.

B.Babic, *Od arheoloskoto bogostva na SR Makedonija, albimsrednovekoven period vo SR Makedonija*, Shkup, 1980, p.103.

16 Z.Vinski, *Autochtone Kulturelemente zur Zeit der slavischen Landnahme des Balkanraums*, Simposium "Predslavenski etnicki elementi u Balkanu i etnogenezi juznih slovena", Sarajevo, 1969, p.189.

17 The archaeological material was displayed in the museum. Oral data about the skeleton materials was provided by the anthropologists Nemeshkeri and A.Dhima.

18 V.Jovanovic, L.Vuksanovic, N.Beric, *New Finds from the Slavic Necropolis of Maticane near Pristina*, in: "Balcano-slavica", 1972, pp.107-113.

19 Unpublished material preserved in the museum of Pristina.

