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THE ALBANIANS IN THE SERBIAN NEMANJA KINGDOM

Using data given by the 10th century Byzantine author Constantine Porphyrogenitus and other historical sources, the distinguished Slavic scholar K. Jirecek long ago established what he calls "the Serbs' first real homeland"¹. Its borders encompassed the mountainous regions around Raska, near today's Novi Pazar. However, in the final decades of the 12th century, a period coinciding with the creation of an independent Serbian state under the Nemanja dynasty, the Serbs succeeded in spreading significantly beyond these borders in the direction of Kosova and Dioclaeia. Early Serbian biographies, especially the lives of Stefan Nemanja written by St. Sava and Stefan the First-Crowned, reflect this first thrust of expansion.

The life of Stefan Nemanja written by his son, Stefan the First-Crowned, states that about 1185 the founder of the Serbian royal dynasty "joined to his first homeland the entire region of Nis, Zvečan, Lipljan, Morava, Vranje, the territory of Prizren, the two Pologs and the areas bordering on them, (...) succeeding with the God's help in vanquishing the barbarian enemies"². The variant of this life written by St. Sava adds that at the same time Stefan Nemanja extended his conquests in Podrimje, Llap, Pult, in the coastal areas of Dioclaeia, and the cities of Danje, Sarda, Drisht, Shkoder, Shar, Ulqin, and Tivar³.

These details from the Life of Stefan Nemanja, although not the only ones⁴, are without doubt the most explicit of mediaeval expansion of the Serbs from their original heartland of Raska in the direction of the lands of the Albanian population to the south and southwest⁵.

In the following years, the Serbs succeeded in extending their conquests even further. During the reign of Tsar Stefan Dusan, all the Albanian territories as far as the border with Thessaly were included in the Serbian dominions for a period of 10 years⁶. It was, however, the territories of former Dioclaeia and Dardania that remained permanently under the Serbian state of the Nemanjas during its two centuries of existence. This, then as now, gave rise to an "Albanian problem" in Serbia.

It must be said that Albanian-Serbian relations in the Middle Ages were mainly those between a conqueror and the conquered. Until the end of the 12th century, the Albanians had been under the multinational state of the Byzantine Empire, which, as we know, did not identify itself with any specific nationality⁷.

Serbian rule brought an essential change on this point. M. Mladenovic, the expert on mediaeval Serbian law, rightly said that the Serbian Nemanja state was not a state of all the people or for all the peoples. It was a state of the Serbs, for the Serbs⁸. Founded on such an ideological basis, it gave no quarter to other peoples who were forcibly incorporated within it⁹.

This is the reason why, in contrast to earlier Byzantine experience, the Albanians felt the impact of the Serbian state as a foreign invasion. Examples such as those of certain Albanian nobles who in 1319 deplored the "intolerable tyranny and yoke of

the king of Raska" are incontrovertible proof of a new kind of awareness among the Albanians¹⁰. In this sense, it seems fair to assert that the Serbian occupation of the northern Albanian territories struck one of the first sparks of Albanian national consciousness and determined these territories as a vital source of this awareness at this early date.

By moving southward the political and ecclesiastical centers of their state, the Serbian Nemanjas did not omit to destroy the old social and political structures they found there. The main measure in this direction was the economic ruin and political emasculation of the local nobility¹¹. Various historical reports of the expropriation and forced expulsion of the Albanian nobility testify to calculated efforts to create a society of Albanian serfs in these territories¹². As a result, toward the beginning of the 14th century, almost all the lands of Kosova, western Macedonia, and Zeta (Montenegro) had been distributed to Serbian feudal lords and especially to the monasteries that were hurriedly built there¹³.

However, the problem could not be solved solely by eliminating the higher strata of Albanian society, because, even as underlings, the Albanians were numerically powerful in the Serbian kingdom and were therefore, no less than today, a "destabilizing factor", to use the term of the prominent Serbian historian Bogdanovic¹⁴. This was the origin of a thorough policy of Serbization evident from the first of the Nemanjas in the 12th century down to Stefan Dusan, the last of them. The keystone of this policy was the forced conversion of Albanians to Serbian

Orthodoxy.

The Serbian invasion of the 12th century found the Albanian populace of the north and northeastern regions ecclesiastically connected to Byzantine Orthodoxy (in Kosova and Macedonia) and to Roman Catholicism (in Dioclaeia and Zeta)¹⁵. The events of the end of the 12th century are the political background to the interesting phenomenon of the penetration of Catholicism from the coastal areas to the interior of the Albanian territories of the northeast. In fact, starting from 1204, besides the traditional Catholic dioceses of Tivar, Ulqin, Shkoder, Danje, and Drisht, documents testify to others at Prizren, Shkup, Gjakove, Gracanice, Trepce, Novoberde, etc¹⁶. Certain separate testimonies such as a document issued by Tsar Stefan Dusan admit that there were even Catholic priests and churches in remote villages, showing that Catholicism had become widespread in these areas¹⁷. The Roman church's offensive against the Orthodox east or the weakening of the church of Constantinople are not enough to explain the scale of this phenomenon. It seems that the widespread adoption of the Catholic rite in these former domains of Byzantine Orthodoxy must have been a response of the Albanians to the suffocating pressure of the state, which at precisely this time was enforcing a harsh policy of converting both Catholic and Orthodox Albanians to the Serbian national church. Conversion to the Serbian church was a priority of Serbian state policy, as can be shown by a glance at the Code of Stefan Dusan, which was a kind of constitution of the mediaeval Serbian kingdom. This code's so-called "anti-heresy clauses" demand that all subjects of the Serbian kingdom and members of foreign communities must be rebaptized in the Serbian church. Catholics in particular, but also Orthodox believers of the Byzantine rite, who refused to undertake such a step, were threatened with severe punishments that extended to the confiscation of property, eviction, imprisonment, branding with a hot iron, and

the death penalty¹⁸. This code laid down the role of the Serbian king as the defender of the Serbian church and the extirpator of "Heresy"¹⁹.

Of course, under such conditions the problem, transcended purely religious bounds. The reason for the Serbian kings' anti-Catholic frenzy can be understood when it is realized that the geographical area where the Catholic rite was practised in the Nemanja kingdom coincided almost exactly with the Albanian-inhabited territories²⁰.

Rebaptizing the Albanians in the Serbian church would in practice mean starting to merge them with the Serbian community. Religious, cultural, and ethnic assimilation were nothing but progressive phases of the same process of Serbization that began with the formal act of rebaptism and the simultaneous adoption of a new Slavic name²¹. This is important, because it is precisely for this reason that one notices at this time a spread of Slavic personal names among Albanians in the Serbian-occupied areas²².

The confrontation between the "schismatics" on the one hand and the "Latins" on the other that ecclesiastical and secular sources continually mention between the 12th and 14th centuries is in fact the confrontation between Serbs and Albanians. The often dogmatic language of mediaeval documents fails to conceal the significance of this apparently religious conflict was not peculiar to the Albanian territories alone. Nobody doubts for example that the savage wars of the 14th and 15th centuries in Bohemia between the Hussite "heretics" and Catholic loyalists were essentially wars between the oppressed Czech people and their German overlords²³. The Czechs did not hesitate to abandon the camp of Catholic orthodoxy that united them with their oppressors and to embrace a "new religion" that distinguished them from and rallied them against the Germans. Clearly, in the territories where the Albanians were confronted with the Serbs the Catholic Church became a kind of "refugium peccatorum", and this explains the extraordinary success of Roman proselytism in Kosova and Macedonia during the time of the Serbian occupation. Embracing Catholicism was in these areas more a political opportunity than a question of belief²⁴.

The formal adoption of Catholicism besides drawing a clear demarcation line between the Albanians and Serbs, also had another important effect. It incorporated the resistance of the Albanians into the powerful anti-Serb coalition of the Catholic monarchs of Europe that the Papacy attempted to construct especially at the start of the 14th century²⁵. There is no doubt that the Serbs' breach with the French Angevins, hitherto their allies, played a decisive role in the creation of this front²⁶.

Common interests gave rise to major campaigns against the Serbs, such as the crusade of 1319 and that 1331, when the commitment of the Papacy, Naples, and Hungary met with a powerful response among Albanian and Croat nobles²⁷. Albania then became an operational base of the West against the Slavs²⁸.

The "internationalization" of the Albanian cause within the Serbian kingdom, in which their adherence to the Catholic European front no doubt played its own major role, created many headaches for the Serbian Nemanjas. In many cases, the sovereigns replied to the pressures of Rome by promising to give up persecuting their Catholic subjects, a promise that they no doubt never kept²⁹. In order to make themselves more convincing, many of them, including "the great persecutor" Stefan Dusan, promised the Papacy to abandon the Serbian "schism" and convert to the Catholic rite³⁰.

There was even one Nemanja, Stefan Uros II, who, in proof of his "devotion" to

Rome, asked Pope Nicholas IV for permission "to overthrow the Bosnian heretics", a subtle way of invading Bosnia without the opposition and even with the approval of the Catholic world³¹.

It must be said that such strategies were not totally ineffective. Even though quite conscious that these were "ploys" from start to finish, and that the Serbian kings were mere deceivers, many popes were obsessed with the idea of a universal church, and hoped until the end for the conversion of the Nemanjas and their people to the Catholic faith, which would also solve the problem of the anti-Catholic persecutions in their realm³². This illusion was so deeply rooted in the Papal Curia and the courts of Catholic Europe, that even an exceptional pope like Pius II momentarily hoped that he could extend the borders of Catholicism and rescue the enslaved peoples of the Balkans by converting to Catholicism no less a person than the terrible Sultan Mehmet II Fatih³³.

1. C.Jirecek, *Trgovacki putevi i radnici Srbije i Bosne u srednjem vijeku*, in "Zbornik Konstantina Jireceka", I, Beograd, 1959, pp.243-247; C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, I. Band, Gotha, 1911, p.120.

2. *Stefan Nemanja nach den Citaten des heiligen Sava und Stefans des Erstgekroenten*, Serbisches Mittelalter, pub. S.Hafner, Verlag Styria, Graz-Wien-Koeln, 1962, pp.82, 87 (hence: *Stefan Nemanja*); C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, I.Band, Gotha, 1911, pp.273-274.

3. *Ibidem*, p.35. Stefan Nemanja's conquest of the cities of Zeta (Dioclaeia, Montenegro), of Pult in Arberia (od Arbanas Pilot) and of the "Byzantine lands" of Llap, Lipjan, etc. is also confirmed by a chrysobul of Stefan the First-Crowned concerning the monastery of Hilandar, dated 1199. See L.Petit - B.Korablev, *Actes de l'Athos*, V; *Actes de Chilandar*, 2e partie (Actes Slaves), St.Petersburg, 1915, p.376.

4. As early as 1173, the bishop of Dioclaeia and Tivar complained of "the persecutions of the great Zupan, from which everybody suffers" (propter persecutionem a magno iupano... in tantis perturbationibus et pressuris positi omnes gemunt et dolent). As far as we know, this is the first report of pressure exerted by Stefan Nemanja against Dioclaeia. See: *Acta Albaniae*, I, No.99. cf.also No.113, 120, 214.

5. On the basis of Byzantine authors (Porphyrogenitus, Kinamos), Jirecek determines the frontiers of what he calls "the homeland of the genuine Serbs" in the area of the Lim, the upper Drin, the valley of the Iber, and the upper reaches of the western Morava. See: C.Jirecek, *Trgovacki putevi i rudnici Srbije i Bosne u srednjem vijeku*, pp.243- 247; C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, p.120.

6. C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, I, p.395; A.Ducellier, *Byzance et le monde orthodoxe*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1986, pp.339-340.

7. M.Braun, *Die Slawen auf dem Balkan*, Leipzig, 1941, p.108.

8. M.Mladenovich, *L'état serbe au moyen âge*, Paris, 1931, p.103; L.Mavromatis, *I monarhike ide sti mesaionike Servia*, in "Symmeikta", 8 (1989), p.362.

9. C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, p.386; G.Ostrogorsky, *Problèmes des relations Byzantine-Serbes au XIVe siècle*, in: "Byzanz und die Welt der Slaven", Darmstadt, 1974, p.83; R.Mihajlicic, *Kraj srpskog carstva*, Beograd, 1974, p.86.

10. "...nequeuntes ulterius ferre perfidiam...curastis opportunitate captata consurgere, et iugo sue tyrannidis et inique conversationis abiecto..." Reply of Pope John XXII to the brothers Mentul, Andrea and Theodor Muzaka, see: A.Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta Historica Hungarica Sacram Illustrantia*, (further: *Monumentenata Hungariae*), tomus I (1216-1352), Rome, 1859, p.831, No.1264.

11. G.Ostrogorsky, *Etienne Dusan et la noblesse serbe dans la lutte contre Byzance*, in: "Byzantion", 22 (1952), p.156-163.

12. *Stefan Nemanja nach Stefan dem Erstgekrönten*, pub.S.Hafner, p.87; Brocardus, *Directorium ad passagium faciendum*, in: "Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, Documents Armeniens", tome II, Paris, 1906, p.484.

13. M.Tërnavá, *Migrimet e popullsisë në territorin e sotëm të Kosovës gjatë shek.XIV-XVI*, in: "Kosova", Prishtina, 1976, pp.292-293.

14. D.Bogdanovic, *Kniga o Kosovu*, Beograd, 1985, p.27.

15. M.Sufflay, *Die Kirchenzustaende im vortuerkischen Albanien*, in: "Illyrisch-albanische Forschungen", I.Band, Muenchen und Leipzig, 1916, pp.198, 216, 228; H.Gelzer, *Der Patriarchat von Achrida*, Leipzig, 1902, pp.3-4, 10-11.

16. "in ecclesiis parochialibus de Briscouia, de Rudenico, de Rogosna et de Trepzo et de Grazaniza in regno Servie...ubi fides catholica colitur et ritus Romanae ecclesiae observatur", see: *Monumenta Hungariae*, vol.I, p.408, r.649; also: *Acta Albaniae*, II, no.20; C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, p.394; M.Sufflay, *Die Kirchenzustaende...*, p.189.

The Catholic dioceses of Prizren and Shkup are mentioned as early as 1204, see: A.Theinet, *Monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium*, I, p.29.

17. *Acta Albaniae*, II, No.46.

18. St.Novakovic, *Zakonik Stefana Dusana*, Beograd, 1898, p.153-154; French translation in A.Boue, *La Turquie d'Europe*, vol.II, Paris, 1840, p.427-428.

19. St.Novakovic, *Zakonik Stefana Dusana*, p.153; A.Boué, *La Turquie d'Europe*, IV, p.427.

20. "prastou Schiete, per antonomasii, fesse Catholice i thone Arbanska vera", P.Bogdanus, *Cuneus Prophetarum*, Pars Prima, Patavii, 1685, Introductio.

21. A.Theiner, *Monumenta Hungariae*, II, pp.9, 11; S.Ljubic, *Listina o odnosih juznoga Slavenstva i mletacke republika*, vol.III, Zagreb, p.186.

22. D.Kostic, *Milos Kopilij Kobilic Obilic*, in: "Revue Internationale des Etudes Balkaniques", Iere annee, Beograd, 1935, p.238; S.Cirkovic, *Les Albanais à la lumière des sources historiques des Slaves du sud*, in: "Les Illyriens et les Albanais", Beograd, 1988, p.353, note 32.

23. H.Pirenne, *Storia d'Europa dalle invasioni al XVI secolo*, Firenze (Sansoni), 1967, p.301.

24. M.Sufflay, *Die Kirchenzustaende...*, p.241.

25. C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, p.352; *Acta Albaniae*, I, No.648 (notes).

26. C.Jirecek, *La civilisation serbe au moyen âge*, Paris, 1920, p.19; C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, pp.318-319, 343, 348; A.Ducellier, *La façade maritime de l'Albanie au moyen âge*, Thessalonique, 1981, pp.333-334.

27. C.Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben*, p.352.

28. M. Sufflay, *Die Kirchengestaende....*, p.208.

29. Worth mentioning here is the letter of Tsar Stefan Dusan to Pope Innocent VI sent in December 1354, in which Tsar Dusan, after admitting the persecutions of the Catholics in his kingdom, promises:

- 1) To return to the Catholics the forcibly sequestered churches and monasteries.
- 2) To stop the rebaptism of Catholics according to the Serbian orthodox rite.
- 3) To release all the bishops, abbots, priests, and Catholic believers who remain in prison, and to return to them their churches, monasteries, and church property.

4) To allow the free practice of the Catholic faith.

5) To allow to return to the bosom of the Catholic Church all those who, by violence or under threat (vel vi metu ve coacti) had been obliged to renounce their faith. See: A. Theiner, *Monumenta Hungaricae*, Vol. II, Rome, 1860, No. 16,

20, pp. 9, 11; A. Tautu, *Acta innocentii Papae VI (1352-1362)*, Rome, 1961, No. 28, pp. 51-54.

30. A. Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium*, I, No. 9, 10, p. 32-33; C. Eubel, *Bullarium Franciscanum*, tomus V, Romae, 1898, p. 49, No. 109, see also note 2; Carolus du Fresne dominus du Cange, *Historia Byzantina*, vol. I (Familiae Augustae Byzantinae), Venetiis, 1729, pp. 228-229. see also: A. d'Avril, *La Serbie Chretienne*, Paris, 1897, p. 124; for the generally opportunist nature of the Serbian Nemanjas' policies toward the Papacy, see: D. Obolensky, *Il Commonwealth bizantino*, Bari (Laterza), 1974, p. 356. Obolensky says that the Serbian kings continually played the card of conversion to Catholicism purely as a political ploy.

31. A. Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta Historica Hungariae Sacrae Illustratia*, Vol. I (1216-1352), Rome, 1859, pp. 377-378.

32. A. Theiner, *Monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium*, I, p. 130, No. 182; D. Farlati, *Illyricum Sacrum*, Vol. VII, Venetiis, 1817, p. 77.

33. F. Babinger, *Maometto il Conquistatore*, Torino (Einaudi), 1967, pp. 212-214.