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**THE ETHNONYMS OF *EPIROTES*, *TRIBALLIANS* AND
ILLYRIANS IN THE BIOGRAPHY OF SKANDERBEG BY
MARINUS BARLETIUS¹**

The use and meaning of ethnonyms in late medieval texts is a complex scholarly issue. In this paper we try to analyze and clarify the reasons why the mentioned ancient/archaic ethnonyms and geographic names are used for naming certain late medieval Balkan inhabitants and territories in the 15th century. “*The Life and Glorious Acts of Heroism of Christ’s Warrior George Castriot, the Ruler of the Epirotes, Who Because of the his Heroic Valor was Called by the Turks Skanderbeg or Alexander the Great*” is the original title of the Zagreb edition of 1743 of the famous biography authored by Marinus Barletius (a Catholic priest with humanistic education 1450/60-1512/13) in 13 books.² The title itself discloses the unusual ethnic terminology that the author uses. In Barletius’ biography of Skanderbeg, the terms “Epirus” and “Epirotes” are used predominantly to refer to both the Albanian population and the territory of modern-day Albania.³ The accurate contemporary ethnonym “Albanians” and the geographic term

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² Marinus Barletius, *Vita et res praeclare gestae Christi Athletae Georgii Castrioti, Epirotarum Principis, qui propter heroicam virtutem suam a Turcis olim Scander-beg, i.e. Alexander Magnus cognominatus est*, libris XIII. Typis Joannis Baptistae Weitz, Zagrebiae, anno 1743; Marin Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata na epirskiot vladetel* (prevod od latinski i beleški: Lj. Basotova-V. Dimova-Janjatova; istoriski beleški: K. Adzievski), Skopje, 2008 (M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*), 2, 5-25. Cf.: Marini Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus praecipue adversus Turcas, gestis, Georgii Castrioti, clarissimi Epirotarum principis, qui propter celeberrima facinora, Scanderbegus, hoc eft, Alexander Magnus, cognominatus fuit*, libri Tredecim, per Marinum Barletium Scodrenfem confcripti, ac nunc primum in Germania caftigatiffime aediti. Argentorati apud Cratonem Mylum, Mense Octobri, Anno M.D. XXXVII (M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*).

³ M. Barleti, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*; I-XIII; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 27, n. 4, 90.

“Albania” are used much less frequently but for the same purpose and the ethnonym “Macedonians” is used quite rarely.⁴ This clearly shows how inconsistent M. Barletius was in using ethnonyms in general. In fact, in his work, the terms “Epirus,” “Epirotes” and “Epirote” are used approximately 150 times and the Albanian attribute of the same meaning is used about 40 times.⁵ In this regard, especially indicative is the following sentence: “The Epirotes who are also called Albanians”.⁶ On the other hand, he calls the Slavic-speaking Macedonian population “Triballians”, “Illyrians” and/or “Bulgarians”. However, this is no reason for M. Barletius not to call the territory inhabited by this population Macedonia. In confirmation of this, at one point he says “Ohrid in Macedonia” and at another “Upper Debar . . . was in contact with Macedonia”.⁷

A question is raised of why Barletius uses the terms “Epirus” and “Epirotes” to refer to the territory of Albania and its population. It seems that the logical explanation is the fact that the name of the late antiquity province that spread in the territory of modern-day central Albania from the 4th to the end of 6th centuries with Dyrrachium as its

⁴ M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*, I-XIII; II-36, 39-41, 44, 48, 55, 58, 59, III-70, IV-115, V-135, 140, VI-149, 158, 167, 169, 187, 194, VII-202, 213, VIII-239, 245, 248, X-289, 292-295, 299-301, 304, XI-312-313, 317, 319, 321-323, 336, 339, XII-352, 353, 370; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 90, 99, 103, 112, 124, 129, 153, 237, 286, 342, 377, 390, 405, 426, 479, 491, 497, 501, 569, 573, 581, 584, 586, 588, 596-601, 605-606, 618, 620-621, 629, 634, 637-641, 645, 668-669.

⁵ M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*; I-XIII; II-36, 39-41, 44, 48, 55, 58, 59, III-70, IV-115, V-135, 140, VI-149, 158, 167, 169, 187, 194, VII-202, 213, VIII-239, 245, 248, x-289, 292-295, 299-301, 304, XI-312, 313, 317, 319, 321-323, 336, 339, XII-352, 353, 370; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 32, 35, 38, 43, 47, 51-52, 63, 70, 79, 87, 90-91, 124, 133-134, 139, 147, 149-150, 159, 162-163, 165, 167, 169, 174, 176-179, 183, 187, 195, 200, 206, 210, 212, 214, 217-218, 223, 225-226, 231-233, 237-238, 241, 248-249, 255-257, 262-266, 269, 274, 278, 281, 283-284, 286, 303, 306-309, 311-312, 319-320, 323, 331, 341, 347, 355, 358, 363-364, 370, 373, 375-376, 381, 383, 402, 411, 413, 419, 421, 431, 433, 437-438, 441, 444, 448, 450, 466, 482, 489, 497, 508, 541, 552, 556, 559, 564, 569, 573, 576, 582, 586, 588, 590, 594-595, 601, 613-614, 617-618, 620-622, 629, 634, 637-639, 645, 670, 679, 684, 689, 701, 719. On the ethnonym “Albanians” and the geographic term “Albania” see the note 3. Cf.: O. J. Schmitt, *Mysians, Macedonians, Dardanians* – Some Remarks on Late Medieval Ethnonyms in the Central Balkans, *Makedonskiot identitet niz istorijata* (Materijali od meġunarodniot nauĉen sobir odrġan po povod 60 godini od osnovanjeto na Institutot za nacionalna istorija-Skopje, 10-12 oktombri 2008), INI-Skopje 2010, 77.

⁶ M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*, II-36; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 90.

⁷ M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*, I-30, V-140; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 79, 286.

seat was *Epirus Nova* (New Epirus).⁸ In other words, in order to refer to the population and their land as many as a thousand years later, he uses the name of a former administrative unit, which territorially does not coincide with the historical geographical region of Epirus. But at the same time, Barletius emphasizes the term “Macedonian” for the Albanian population in order to justify Skanderbeg’s self-representation as New Alexander. In this context, Barletius euphorically underlines “the invincible Epirus or Albania, which used to be called Macedonia”,⁹ thus evidently drawing an inaccurate parallel with the period of antiquity. We might mention that the origin of Olimpias, the mother of the Alexander the Great/Macedonian, was from ancient Epirus. Both appellations of the Albanians, as Epirotes and Macedonians, are historically inaccurate.

On the other hand, in order to refer to the population in Macedonia, he uses as many as three terms, “Triballians”, “Illyrians” and “Bulgarians,” but not “Macedonians”. For example, according to M. Barletius, Upper Debar was a region of the Triballians or populated by “Bulgarians or Triballians”.¹⁰ Historiography teaches us that in the period of antiquity, the Triballians lived in territories of medieval and modern-day Serbia and therefore Byzantine authors of the 13th–14th centuries (G. Pachymeres, T. Metochites, N. Gregoras and J. Kantakouzenos) invariably called the medieval Serbs Triballians.¹¹ Taking into consideration that during the Serbian rulers Milutin and Dušan, the Serbian government spread to also include the regions of Macedonia and Albania, it seems understandable why the term “Triballians” is also used to refer to the population in Macedonia with the meaning of a former politonym (former subjects of the Serbian

⁸ Historia E Populit Shqiptar, I, Tiranë 2002, 171-179; N. Ceka, The Ilirians to the Albanians, Tirana 2005, 271-292; T. Filiposki, Prilog kon prašanjeto za formiranjeto na docnoantičkata provincija Nov Epir, *Glasnik na INI*, 53/1-2, Skopje 2009, 51-57; Idem, gradot Lihnid i provincijata Nov Epir, *Istorija*, XLV/1-2, Skopje 2009, 5-11; Idem, The Province of New Epirus in the Late Antique Sources and the Question of Its Capital (4th-6th century A.D.), *Macedonian Heritage*, XIV/36-37, Skopje 2010, 167-172.

⁹ M. Barletii, De vita, moribus ac rebus, X-304; M. Barleti, Skenderbeg-životot i delata, 606.

¹⁰ M. Barletii, De vita, moribus ac rebus, V-140; M. Barleti, Skenderbeg-životot i delata, 286.

¹¹ Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije, t. VI, Beograd 1986 (Vizantijski izvori, VI), 163, n. 21, 666.

state), of course with a Slavic connotation. Hence, Skanderbeg's mother is known as Voisava Tribalda.¹² The term "Triballians" in Barletius' biography is seldom used as a name for the Serbs.

The ethnonym of Illyrians appears as a second name used to denote the population of Macedonia. In fact, "Illyrians" is synonymous with "Slavs". With this meaning, which is clearly understood from the context, it appears about 15 times. Thus, at one point, M. Barletius says that the dialect/language of the residents of Debar is Slavic.¹³ This meaning of the term "Illyrians" is at first glance confusing given that the Byzantine authors G. Pachymeres, T. Metochites, N. Gregoras and J. Kantakouzenos of the 13th–14th centuries very often used the term "Illyrians" as an ethnonym of the period of antiquity to refer to the medieval Albanians.¹⁴ This putting of an equation mark between the ancient Illyrians and the medieval Albanians in the Byzantine sources appears understandable (as the use of "Triballians" to refer to the Serbs is). And so probably for the same reason that he calls the Albanians "Epirotes", in addition to Albanians and Macedonians, M. Barletius uses the term "Illyrians" to refer to the Slavic population of Macedonia (probable as population of the former prefecture of Illyricum).

The term "Bulgarians" is used in a very restricted number of cases to denote the Slavic population of Macedonia. And so at one point Barletius says that the region of Upper Debar "was inhabited by Bulgarians or Triballians".¹⁵ The use of the term "Bulgarians" in M. Barletius' work should not surprise anyone. In fact, the territory of Macedonia was described in the sources as "Bulgarian" populated by "Bulgarians" for a long period of time. More specifically, in the 9th–

¹² B. Petrovski, Voisava Tribalda, *Gjergj Kastrioti-Skenderbeu (1405-1468)*, Materiale nga Tubimi Shkencor, me Rastine e 600 vjetorit te Lindjes se Tij, Mbajatur ne Shkup me 25 dhe 26 nentor 2005 (=Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg (1405-1468), Materijali od naučnriot sobir, po povod 600 godini od negovoto ragjanje, održan vo Skopje na 25 i 26 noemvri 2005), Shkup/Skopje 2006, 67-78.

¹³ M. Barletii, De vita, moribus ac rebus, I-7, II-38, III-79-84, 90, IV-91, V-128, 140, VI-151, 164, X-290-291, XI-326, XII-357; M. Barleti, Skenderbeg-životot i delata, 32, n.12, 52, 70, n. 55, 86, n. 15, 88, n. 22, 112, 167, n. 30, 171, 174, 177, 178-179, 263, n. 15, 286, 295, 296, n. 47, 309, n. 3, 324, 417, 616, 646, 698. Cf.: O. J. Schmitt, Mysians, Macedonians, Dardanians, 77.

¹⁴ Vizantijski izvori, VI, 163, n. 21, 649, 654.

¹⁵ M. Barletii, De vita, moribus ac rebus, V-140, 144, XII-359; M. Barleti, Skenderbeg-životot i delata, 286.

10th centuries, Macedonia was part of the First Bulgarian Empire; a Bulgarian attribute in the later sources about Tsar Samuil's state; in the 11th–12th centuries administratively it belonged to the Byzantine theme of Bulgaria and the diocese of the Ohrid Archbishopric, which contains a Bulgarian attribute in its appellation; was part of the Second Bulgarian Empire for a brief period of time.¹⁶ All those earlier Bulgarian attributes may have been a good enough reason to call the population of Macedonia in the 15th century Bulgarians.

Very rarely the term "Mysians" is also used. The first time it appears next to the term "Triballians" and the second time Simeon Nemanja refers as "king of the Mysians and the Illyrians".¹⁷ In the Byzantine sources of the late 10th century (L. the Deacon and J. Geometres) as well as in the later sources of the 13th–14th centuries (T. Metochites, N. Gregoras and J. Kantakouzenos, M. Filos), "Mysians," a term of the period of antiquity, is largely used to indicate the medieval Bulgarians.¹⁸

We can stress that the ethnonyms of Triballians, Illyrians, Bulgarians and Mysians in M. Barletius' work are used to refer to the Slavic population of Macedonia, the historical and geographical region that has always bordered on Albania. The use of terms/ethnonyms from the period of antiquity was commonplace among medieval authors and the tendency continued and even intensified during the Humanism and the Renaissance. A result of this, as we have seen above, was the inconsistent use of ethnonyms of the medieval period in M. Barletius' work as well as in other works including the one by Marinus Segonus of Novo Brdo, Kosovo, of the late 15th century. In M. Segonus' work,

¹⁶ The terms "*Bulgarians*" and "*Bulgarian*" used after 1018 may, in fact, have at least four meanings: 1. They may be a reference to the state and legal traditions of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (681–971) and particularly to Samuil's state (successors of dynasties and uprisings for resurrection of the state); 2. They may indicate affiliation to the Byzantine theme of "Bulgaria" with Skopje as its seat; 3. They may indicate affiliation to the diocese of the Ohrid archbishopric, the head of which was also "archbishop of the whole of Bulgaria"; 4. They may indicate a tendency to equate the terms "Slavs" and "Bulgarians" on the part of the Byzantine administration in Thessaloniki and the office of Ohrid archbishops. See: T. Filiposki, *The Titles of St. Clement of Ohrid, Sv. Kliment Ohridski v kulturata na Evropa* (BAN-Kirilo-metodievski naučen centar, Sofija, 25-27 noemvri 2016 g.), Sofija 2018, 565, n. 7, 566.

¹⁷ M. Barletii, *De vita, moribus ac rebus*, II-48, III-90; M. Barleti, *Skenderbeg-životot i delata*, 112, 192.

¹⁸ Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije, t. III, Beograd 1966, 15, n. 3, 26, n. 10, 402; Vizantijski izvori, VI, 92, n.27, 139, n. 110, 163, n. 21, 659.

Serbia is called “Mysia” and Kosovo “Dardania”, and he also speaks of “Macedonians” and “Macedonia”. He mentions several ethnic groups live in the Central Balkans: “Serviani, Dardani, Macedones, Bulgari, Valachi, and Germani”. Contemporary terminology is used to refer to three of them (Bulgari, Serviani/Rasciani, Valachi) and terms of the period of antiquity is used to refer to the other three (Germani of Novo Brdo, Dardani and Macedones), ancient and non-ethnic meaning.¹⁹

Archaic and contemporary ethnic terminologies are used side by side, and the spatial thinking is not always very exact. For example, the Byzantines use an archaic terminology for designating ethnic groups. On the other hand, authors of the 15th and the 16th centuries, like M. Barletius, are deeply committed to the humanistic currents of the period. That means that they imitate the terminology and spatial thinking of ancient geographers and historians such as Ptolemaios or Diodor Siculus. All this leads us to the conclusion that the ethnic terminology in late medieval texts is more relevant as an insight into the intellectual world of the authors than it is as an indication of an ethnic identity in the modern sense of the word. M. Barletius did take notice of the linguistic and cultural differences like, for instance, those between Macedonian Slavs and Albanians in Mokra (modern-day border area between Macedonia and Albania) yet men from both groups fought on the side of Skanderbeg. The linguistic and ethnic differences obviously did not matter. Ethnicity clearly did not have a major impact on the social and political behavior of the people in our source or at least it was not a priority in defining identities. Religion, social status and economic interests mattered much more as they did in other parts of Europe.²⁰ In the Middle Ages, the territories of modern-day Albania and Macedonia were not an exception.

¹⁹ A. Pertusi, Martino Segono di Novo Brdo vescovo di Dulcigno. Un umanista serbo-dalmata del tardo Quattrocento (Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo. Studi storici Fasc. 128-130), Rome 1981, 88-102; O. J. Schmitt, Mysians, Macedonians, Dardanians, 76-77.

²⁰ O. J. Schmitt, Mysians, Macedonians, Dardanians, 77-78; D. Gorgiev, Die Bevölkerung im makedonisch-albanischen Grenzgebiet im 15. Und 16. Jahrhundert nach osmanischen Quellen, *Südost-Forschungen*, 65/66 (2006-2007), R. Oldenbourg/München 117-136; T. Filiposki, Der Ohrider Župan Andrea Gropa, *Südost-Forschungen*, 69/70 (2010/2011), R. Oldenbourg/München 2012, 19-23.