

Ardian MUHAJ

**THE ECONOMY OF THE ALBANIAN TERRITORIES IN THE
CENTURY OF SCANDERBEG AND THE EUROPEAN
ECONOMIC CRISES DURING THE LATE MIDDLE AGES¹**

Political events contribute a small part of the historical context when describing and analyzing the political history of any period. The science of history is a set of specified relationships encompassing different historic matters that focus and organize inquiry to describe, explain, and predict different events and behaviors. The territorial possessions of the Kastrioti family and their metropolis Kruja experienced an economic development during the XV century, from the moment the Kastrioti family became the rulers of Kruja to the annexing by Venice after death of Scanderbeg. During the Scanderbeg era, these territory possessions had the highest economic evaluation rate. Scanderbeg's behavior towards Venice, Ottoman Empire and Aragon gave a strategic first-hand role to Albania in general, and Kruja, the metropolis of Albania during the Scanderbeg era, in particular, and caused a clear economic growth compared with the previous period. In addition, we have a new administrative approach addressing the greater influence of man over the territory, expressed in a different territorial organization and effective exploit of his natural sources. Moreover, this paper analyzes and compares the economic and demographic indexes of the Albanian territories with the Europe's economic situation, in the framework of the European crises in the Late Middle Ages, as it is known by the Albanian historiography.

There is a new approach of history discipline of scientific research due to the political changes of the second half of the XX century. So, at the same time, we have an intertwine of the scientific character of historiography as an approach to historical truth with the search for new

¹ This presentation is part of the lectures segment run from 1-2 November 2018.

vectors through which the past can be more clearly grasped. As aforementioned said, historians have begun to look away from the narrow confines of the history and antecedents of the nation-state toward economic history, social history, cultural history, and, subsequently, other new branches of historical inquiry as well.²

In the today discourse, the debates on the hero are displaced in a dominant discourse of bulwark myths. There is a long history of the efforts of Balkan people to show up as bulwark christianistic, or defenders of Christianity. Many of these “soldiers and athletes,” stood face to face, especially in the innumerable crusades of the European Christians against the north European pagans or other European Christians.³ Regardless the fiery rhetoric, as Alain Ducellier says, only 14 years after the proclamation of the Orthodox Patriarchate under the rule of Rome, Constantinople fell into the hands of Mehmet II.⁴

The political configuration of the Balkans, in general, and the Albanian territories makes the XV century distinctive from the previous centuries. Venice and the Ottoman state were the two main actors during these two centuries. None of these overwhelming actors of the politics in the centuries was present in the previous centuries dominated by Byzantium, Serbs, Bulgarians and the French or the Catalans. In the XV century, the political map of the Albanian territories was also simplified by a great number of unstable local powers and became a territory with four units that for simplification are called Albania, so Albania under the Venetian rule, or Northern Albania, Albania under the Ottoman rule or the Southern Albania, Albania under the Serb rule or Kosova, and the Albania under the rule of Albanian noble families. The latter was ruled in the two first decades of this century by the Balshaj family, and from 1440-1470 by the Kastrioti family.

² Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³The crusades of the Catholics against each-other culminated especially during the One Hundred years War and the Schism in the second half of the XIV century. Caroline M. Barron, “The Reign of Richard II”, in Michael Jones (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: c. 1300-c. 1415*, vol. VI, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 308.

⁴ Alain Ducellier, *Le drame de Byzance. Idéal et échec d’une société chrétienne*, Paris: Hachette, 1997, p. 7-8.

During the XV century the number of Albanian noble families increased also, allowing us create a complete idea about their role in the society of the time. The destruction of the Serbian state after Dušan's death and the gradual change of the Byzantine state, from a glorious empire into a city, or as is affirmed by some authors, in a capital without a state, gradually puts in evidence the importance of the Albanian local element.⁵

The stability of the dominant political factors, caused the stability of the Albanian political factor. In this aspect, the Albanian noble families that are affirmed in the XV century, continue to be consolidated, nevertheless the sporadic transfer of the political overpower from one overwhelming factor to another. Also, it can be said that they benefited from the rivalry of this pair of political actors, to strengthening their positions, in the shaft of extending their power and influence in the Albanian territories. The Scanderbeg case reflects clearly the great political influence he had in the Albanian territories and in direction of gaining more and more autonomy from the rivalry of the great political actors. It's not by chance that Scanderbeg as Albanian leader succeeded in this century more than any other noble leader to affirm his Albanian local power, and this he did it in a territory strategically important, where were clashed their political rivalries, a situation which Scanderbeg understood and exploited with capability and vision.

Also, in the area of the Venetian dominion, the local nobility was formed and profiled. However, the character of the political power in the Venetian state, was different from that of the Ottoman state. The Venetians did not need to be politically served by the local aristocracies. Venice was a republic of aristocrats, where the power was by centuries at the hands of a dozen big aristocratic families and in the tens of other less important Venetian families. For this reason, the Albanian local nobility under the political influence of the Venetian

⁵Also, in the second half of the XV century when the Balshaj family was politically destroyed, and Venice had taken all their previous possessions. Scanderbeg aimed to present himself during the confrontation with Venice as the legal descendant of Balshaj. Certainly, this was not pretended by Scanderbeg by being based upon the family origin heritage, but upon the political legitimacy. The long showdown between Balshaj and Venice to rule the coastal area of Northern Albania is widely described by Pranvera Bogdani, *Lufta e Principatës së Balshajve dhe e sundimtarëve të tjerë shqiptarë kundër Venedikut në 20 vjetët e para të shek. XV*. Tirana, 1984, PhD theses.

domination faced the fact of the total exclusion from participating in any connection of the political power.⁶

Indeed, this exclusive approach towards the Albanian local nobility was not typical of the Venetian Albania only.⁷ It was also a characteristic of the Venetian Aegean, Venetian Corfu, and of all the Venetian colonies in the Mediterranean.⁸ Certainly, this, in the short-term aspect was at the detriment of the Albanian nobility, because the exclusion from the political power undermined the economic exclusion too. However, in the long-term aspect, turned out with the same consequences for Venice itself, because Venice did not exploit the power of this nobility in its own interest, and as consequence went alone losing political territory facing the Ottoman rival.

Also, the Ottomans, regardless the different approach and inclination to integrate the higher strata of the Albanian society in the local political power administration, had also their political mechanisms to limit and keeping under control this power of local influence.⁹

Structurally, we have to do two phenomena of different origins. The Albanian aristocracy of the XV-XVI centuries is part of a negotiation history and local adaptation, with a political power in expansion and continuous enforcement, in which the Albanian aristocracy is integrated, following at the same time the dynamics of this political enforcement. Of course, this is also due to the Ottoman policy focused on the uprooting of the local aristocracies through establishing them in

⁶The Senate ordered that Albanians to be excluded by the high military positions in Albania. *Acta Albaniae Veneta Saeculorum XIV et XV*. Josephi Valentini S. J. Labore reperta et Transcripta Ac Typis Mandata. Pars Prima: Saeculum XIV complectens. Tomus Primus (1): Ab initio ad usque annum MCCCXXXIV. Centro internazionale di Studi Albanesi Palermo/ Istituto Universitario Orientale Napoli/ Istituto di Studi Albanesi dell' Università di Roma/ Fondazione Giorgio Cini Venezia/ Ponteficio Istituto di Studi Orientali Roma I/3, Munchen: Rudolf Trofenik, n° 1909, p. 156; See also Freddy Thiriet, *Histoire de Venise*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1976, 5.

⁷According to Giuseppe Valentini, "Rezultate e fundme te studimeve Kastrotjane. (Bashkëfjalim me At Valentinin)", *Shejzat*, 1968, nr. 3-4, republished in *Skënderbeu dhe Papati. 1442-1467. (Studime dhe tekste historike)*, translated by Ilirjana Angoni, Plejad, Tiranë, 2013, p. 51, Venediku, "nuk duronte kend me çue krye n'afërsi të zotnimeve të tija" sepse nuk e shkelte "traditën politike qi kishte mos me u dhanë kurr të huejve vendas as sundim as komandë".

⁸None of the important positions in the area of Venice's Albania was not allowed to be hold by Albanians throughout the Venetian rule starting from the end of the XIV century until the end of the XVI century. National State Archive/Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, (AQSH), F. 132. D. 5.

⁹See S. Pulaha, "Shpronësimi i klasës feudale", p. 139-165.

the state's social hierarchy, but at the same time through the circulation of the aforementioned elite in different areas, aiming to obstruct their settlement in a specific territory.

During all the XVI century, also previously in the XV century, the Ottomans had already under application a well-defined system of circulation and elites' calendar, compounding an important element of the social control in the Ottoman state. The circulation or the recycling of the officials, multiplied the state power over the society. The Ottoman state detached the local networks of the social solidarity that were likely to become political contradictory by continuously moving and transferring their elites. Through this destruction of the local connection, the officials and the population were concentrated towards the central power as a determinant source of authority. Thus, the national structure had consolidated due to the social calendar control, by limiting the chances of the local elites for autonomous political action. These expectations in the most of cases fulfilled, while the Ottoman state enlarged. The register of the Albanian sanjak of 1431, as one of the earliest registers known to us, proves that the system of Timar was immediately applied, transforming the feudal property situation in these areas, majority of which was Christian.¹⁰ The necessity to enlarge more and more the national property on the land, pushed the state to encourage in different ways the Christian feudal to abandon their property rights in exchange of accepting the new system. Part of this compromise, was also the feudal lords who turned to timar-holders, but could continue to keep the Christian belief.¹¹

Mehmet I had to make big compromises with these local dynasties, because his authority had weakened during the inter-regnum period. His rule was characterized by clashes and dissatisfactions who exploded in the middle of the epigone, members of feudal class and Mehmet II about this circulation policy. There where the state faced the opposition of the powerful feudal elites, was forced to compromise, by sharing the revenues of these properties with the local lords, but there

¹⁰ Halil İnalçık, *Hicrî 835 tarihli Sûret-i defter-i sancak-i Arvanid*, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1954.

¹¹ İnalçık, H., "Arnaëutluk", p. 654; İnalçık, H., *Hicri 835 Tarihli Suret-i Defter-i Sancak-i Arvanid*, TTK Yayınlan, Ankara 1954; Pulaha, S., *Pronesia feudale në tokat shqiptare*, shek. XV- XVI, p. 44. In Mat's area (vilayet-i Mat) on 1467, the majority of those who are holders of Timar, were Christians. Dritan Egro, phd, p. 190-191.

where the state was strong and the local elites less settled, the double property was not applied.¹²

This circulation system prevailed in most of the Balkan countries and Anatol, by making the autonomous elite with inherited properties part of the national administration or state's servants, although in most of the cases with enlargement of properties.¹³

If we analyze the action or the reaction of the Albanian nobility towards such a policy of periodic elites' circulation, we notice that their possibility to challenge this was less and unfruitful. Here makes an exception that figure, which not in vain has attracted the attention and the interest of different authors in the later centuries, but also of the contemporaries; Scanderbeg.

It was impossible to define the appropriate rate of the economic development of a society or territory in the Middle Ages, because reliable statistical data on the main economic indexes are missing. However, we can have an idea about the trend of the economic development during this period.¹⁴

Under Scanderbeg's rule, Albania was economically and demographically was the less developed unit, but its role remains strategically fundamental for the military, trade and economic affairs. Political stability is one of the most important indirect indexes of the economic development. Scanderbeg is the longest-reigning ruler in the Albanian territories. His capability to maintain his power stability depended first on the possibilities to feed, provide security, and reward his supporters, the followers, and his subjects. If Scanderbeg were not able to guarantee the security and the life of his people, his power would not have lasted so long. There are many other indirect, but concrete indexes of this economy with positive development trends. It

¹² Karen Barkey, "In Different Times: Scheduling and Social Control in the Ottoman Empire, 1550 to 1650", *Comparative Studies in Society and History. An International Quarterly*, volume 38, 1986, Cambridge University Press, pp. 460-483. See also Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

¹³ S. Pulaha informs us that the Ottoman power after "prepossessing in this was the children of the great lords converted to Islam, putted them in high positions in their country or in the Ottoman national apparatus, granted to them big feuds, and other privileges". S. Pulaha, "Shpronësimi i klasës feudale shqiptare nga toka dhe rrugët e integritit", p. 259.

¹⁴ Steven A. Epstein, *An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe, 1000-1500*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, p. 3.

is enough to compare the desperate situation of the last pre-Ottoman rulers of Vlora, the marquis Zharko and his wife Rugina Basha threatened by the Venetians by taking hostage their possessions because of the debts they had with the Venetians merchants and the Senate with Scanderbeg's situation. The latter could send the ambassadors beyond the Adriatic, except Ragusa. Also, we can compare the continuous reports of the Venetians officials that constantly show the miserable situation of the strongholds and the incapability to obtain the funds for their repair and enforcement with documents reporting about the stronghold of Kruja that was well kept and fortified. Although the taxes were partly issued by the Venetian administrations in Albania, they were spent for the fortification of the strongholds and the Venetian defense system. Here, we can mention the wine's tithe used for the maintenance of Shkodra's stronghold.¹⁵ Scanderbeg's investment for the security of the coastal area also proves the priorities of his economic policy. Rodon's fortification, so close to Kruja, and the guarantee of Shufada harbor also so close to his capital, clearly shows his policies. On the other hand, we do not have any urban center in the area from Kruja to Skopje that could serve as a unification and connection point among people.¹⁶ Kruja and Rodon had different economic development and their economic development differed from the other Albanian cities under the Venetian rule. The crises of the city had also affected the northwestern Albania, which was the most developed area. So, Balëza that once was the archbishopric center, in the cadaster of Shkodra of 1416 is now mentioned as a simple village with 25 homes. The city of Svaç that in the XIV century has its own coins was found in 1406 in a desperate situation. The bishop of Svaç asked the Venetians to help to rebuild it. In 1443, Svaç was a simple village, and in 1476 it is mentioned as "villa de Suazzo" - the village of Suaçi.¹⁷

¹⁵ B. Cecchetti, *Degli stabilimenti politici della repubblica veneta nell' Albania e delle sollevazioni in Oriente: fino al secolo XVI*, Venezia, Grimaldo, 1874, pp. 1-22.

¹⁶ In bases of the 1455 register, also Tetovo is mentioned as a village with few Albanian families based on the name. However, Tetovo, during the XVI-XVII centuries, changed from a developed city into an important trade center.

¹⁷ Milan Šufflay, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*, Botim i Drejtorisë së Përgjithshme të Arsimit, Tiranë 1926, p. 70-71.

The fact that Scanderbeg except the maritime communication through the Shufada harbor, succeeds in the fortification process by bringing masters from Ragusa in the Rodon's castle is meaningful for his financial means. It is not true that Scanderbeg plundered the merchants in his territories or in the neighboring Albanian territories.¹⁸ It was the security that Scanderbeg guaranteed to the merchants what convinced them to trade, may they be Ragusans through maritime roads or may they be Albanians merchants by land, challenging and avoiding this way the Venetian monopoly.¹⁹

The access of the Kastrioti Principality to the sea was essential for their independence from the Venetian monopoly. Around 1417, Gjon Kastrioti advanced from Mat towards the Adriatic where apparently obtained the consent by the Balshaj family for the Shufada, a strategic harbor, which was attractive for the Ragusan and Italian merchants. The latter were angry by the continuous vexations of the Venetian monopoly in Lezha and Durrës.²⁰ Therefore, it is interesting that the Kastrioti family obtained access to the sea without taking Kruja. For this reason, the taking of Kruja by them, that was carried out by Scanderbeg, except for strengthening this vital communication with the sea, also unified the territory where he exercised his power, from the Adriatic to the Drini i Zi valley. Scanderbeg, like his father did, followed a policy that was contrary to the Venetian customs duty administration in Lezha and in Durrës.²¹ Venice tried to have its monopoly in trade. Around 1425, the Ragusan merchants were banned from Shkodra,²² while on 1431 was totally forbidden the import of the foreign drapery from Dalmatia and Venetian Albania.²³ The confiscation of the Ragusan ships, loaded with Albanian grain, without respecting the Venetian customs duty sovereignty in the rivers' estuaries, aimed the protection of this monopoly. The grain and the salt

¹⁸ A. Greif has widely treated the foundations of society's institutions influencing in the economic growth. Avner Greif, *Institutions and the path to the Modern Economy. Lessons from Medieval Trade*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁹ "It is permissible to transform the evidence of town walls into a tentative description of broad demographic trends". R. S. Lopez and H. A. Miskimin, *The Economic Depression of the Renaissance*, p. 414-416.

²⁰ AAV VII 1972; 2014; 2017; 2021; 2049; 2054; Schmitt, Arbëria, p. 251.

²¹ Schmitt, Arbëria, p. 263.

²² AAV XII 2965.

²³ AAV XIV 3467.

were the two most important stocks in this trade policy. "*Major utilitas Durrachi est sal*", was said in a Senate decision.²⁴ At the same time, Venice blocked in its influence area all other salt-pans by forcing the Albanian merchants, to not trade salt in Shufada, but the salt of Durrës.²⁵ The cape of Rodon has not been densely inhabited. Deeply situated in the bay of Drin, this cape had a very good position to attack the merchant convoys coming from Dalmatia. This also explains the reason why it shows in history as a pirate hideout.²⁶

However, the Kastrioti family kept its own salt-pans and sold their salt in Shufada to the Ragusans and Italian merchants (1424).²⁷ Venice tried by also asking the collaboration with the Ottoman commanders of Kruja to force Gjon Kastrioti buy Venetian salt (1428), but of course without achieving the complete abeyance of Shufada. Keeping off the Venetian monopoly became more and more difficult because Shufada was used as an intermediary harbor for the Ragusan ships in their sailing towards Vlora under the Ottoman rule as trade place of grain and salt in the area. Vlora during the '30 and '40 of the XV century became the most important generator of salt in the Albanian space.²⁸ The relations between Ragusa and the Ottomans increased. The Ragusans start to be supplied with grain more and more from the Ottomans.²⁹ The Ragusan ships carried stocks even through Albania shores and Puglia.³⁰ For this reason, the Seignory couldn't totally avert the local competition.

Scanderbeg, not only wasn't ready to give up his salt-pans, but also enforced more their security and the harbor of the foreign trade.³¹ The

²⁴ AAV II 474.

²⁵ For example, the Jonima family in 1409. AAV III 1028; 1190; 1201; V 1661.

²⁶ Alain Ducellier, "Gjendja e kepit të Rodonit në fillim të shek. XV sipas disa dokumenteve raguzane", *Studime historike*, 1/ 1977, p. 123-132. The inhabitants of Shën Athanas of Rodoni had twice attacked the Ragusan ships. The first attack was in January 23, 1324, and the second attack was in March 9, 1335. *Monumenta Ragusina*, I, p. 106; *Acta Albaniae*, I, nr. 694, p. 207.

²⁷ AAV XII 2944.

²⁸ Hocquet, *Sel I 243*: "Affaiblir Durazzo entrain donc dans la politique des Turcs...", *Hrabak*, *Promet* 257 v.

²⁹ Momčilo Spremić, *Dubrovnik e gli Aragonesi (1442-1495)*, Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, Palermo, 1986, p. 151.

³⁰ Momčilo Spremić, *Dubrovnik e gli Aragonesi (1442-1495)*, Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, Palermo, 1986, p. 155.

³¹ AAV XXII 5967.

construction of Rodon's stronghold was a well-conceived step to protect the harbor of Shufada from the pirates and the Venetians, unless being a window of communication with the other coast of Adriatic. As A. Ducellier emphasizes, there are few data on the Cape of Rodon prior to XV century, and we should not have the conviction that even before and at least for XIV century, the Cape of Rodon has densely been inhabited. This cape had a very good position to attack the merchant convoys coming from Dalmatia. This also explains the reason why in the beginning it comes out in history as a pirate hideout.³²

The effects of this economic policy militarily protected were very soon felt. Thus, in 1455, it was said that Scanderbeg had fill the market of Lezha with cheap salt.³³ In the following years, he improved the relations with the Seignory by showing his readiness to buy the Venetian salt in Lezha (1460).³⁴ However, Scanderbeg was very careful when making these trade concessions, not harming his economic interest. Also, in exchange of that, he added the annual subsidiary measure taken by Venice and since 1451 was considered by the Venetians themselves as too big and over passed the capability of Lezha's coffer to pay.³⁵

Scanderbeg's Albania served as a shelter place also for those Albanians who were in danger in the Venetian or the Ottoman Albania, and the case of Andrea Engjëlli's sons clearly proves this. So, the descendants of this family represent the "diaspora" of Drishti in the area of Scanderbeg possession. Their antagonism towards the foreclosed policies followed by Venice, was openly manifested for the first time in the case of Scanderbeg's war against Venice because of Danja, when the father of Pal and Pjetër, Andrea Engjëlli was accused for conspiracy against the Venetian rule. According to the charges, he together with some others tried to do a military coup through which would surrender the stronghold of Drishti to Scanderbeg. The fact that the father of the future archbishop of Durrës died in prison from the

³² The Ragusan ships were twice attacked from the inhabitants of Rodon, on 23 January 1324 and on 9 March 1335. *Monumenta Ragusina*, I, p. 106; *Acta Albaniae*, I, nr. 694, p. 207.

³³ AAV XXIII 6330.

³⁴ AAV XXIII 6450; XXIV 6938.

³⁵ AAV XXI 5701.

Venetians tortures, proves the gravity of the established situation.³⁶ However, the career of his sons would be tied to Scanderbeg and will be developed since then and in the following years out of the Drishti area.

Neither the fact that Scanderbeg passed the Adriatic and undertook a nearly two years campaign in Southern Italy, aiding and supporting Ferrante of Aragon, did not compromise his position. In the Middle Ages, we have many cases of feudal lords which possessed geographically detached feuds from their country of origin or residence, even many of them enjoyed the titles over such feuds without never visiting them. The English king as we know, was a vassal of the French king, because he possessed a feudal possession in France's southwestern part, with its center in Bordeaux. On one hand he was the sovereign of England. On the other hand, he was a vassal in France.³⁷

It can be said that except the allocentric outlook that prevails today, it is aimed to illustrate Scanderbeg as destructor of his homeland for the protection of Dante's homeland from the danger coming from Mehmet II homeland. Scanderbeg didn't destroy his homeland. On the contrary, he is a grand patron of his territory.

³⁶ "[...] fuit tormentatus, et ob tormenta mortuus est in carceribus." AAV XXI, nr. 5763; E. Malaj, *Drishti. Historia dhe fizionomia e një qyteti mesjetar*, p. 158.

³⁷ There is a wide bibliography on this situation and the dynasty problems that caused the explosion of the so-called Hundred Years War is wide. We have summarized this bibliography in our paper Ardian Muhaj, *Portugal e a Coroa de Aragão nos séculos XIV-XV. A Guerra dos Cem Anos e a sua influência na decadência da Catalunha e na expansão de Portugal*, (Master Theses), Lisbon: University of Lisbon, 2006.

