

TWO IRISH TRAVELLERS IN ALBANIA IN 1322

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Despite intensive research and impassioned interest on the part of Albanian scholars, the origins of the Albanians as a people remain shrouded in mystery. The crucial second half of the first millennium, i.e. 500-1000 A. D. which might provide the missing link to the Illyrian inhabitants of the region in antiquity, yields virtually no information and linguistic records of the earlier stages of the Albanian language. These records, which could serve as a reliable guide, are missing. Throughout the Middle Ages, Albania formed the cultural and often political frontier between the Roman and Venetian West which used Latin as its official language, and the Byzantine East which used Greek and later to an extent, Serbian. Indeed there are no substantial traces of the Albanian language predating the fifteenth century when the first texts occur: the somewhat mysterious Bellifortis text from 1405 (cf. Elsie 1986), the well-known Baptismal Formula of Paulus Angelus of 1462, a curse from the year 1483 (cf. Braun & Camaj 1972), the so-called Easter Gospel or Pericope (cf. Borgia 1930) which is generally thought to date from the end of the fifteenth century, and the short vocabulary of Arnold von Harff (cf. Elsie 1984), a German pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land who, during a stopover in Durrës in the spring of 1497, recorded twenty-six words, eight phrases and twelve numbers of Albanian.

Though Byzantine historians, upon whom we must rely for much of our knowledge of the southwestern Balkans in the centuries preceding these texts, have left details of battles, revolts and political changes in this region and elsewhere, they are often strangely silent as to the customs and languages of the non-Greek inhabitants of their peripheral territories, an indifference to the 'barbarians' which is a trait they may have inherited from the Ancient Greeks.

It is generally assumed that the early Albanian tribes, facilitated by the collapse of the great Bulgarian empire at the end of the 10th century, began expanding from their mountain homeland in the 11th and 12th centuries where they had lived as nomadic shepherds, initially taking full possession of the northern and central Albanian coast and by the 13th century spreading southward towards what is now southern Albania and into western Macedonia. They first entered the annals of post-classical recorded history in the second half of the 11th century and it is only at this time that we may speak with any degree of certainty about an Albanian people. In his 'History' written in 1079-1080, Byzantine historian Michael Attaliates was first to refer to the *Albanoi* as having taken part in a revolt against Constantinople in 1043 and to the *Arbanitai* as subjects of the duke of Dyrrachium.

The period of crystallization, to avoid the much more difficult term ethnogenesis, of the Albanian people as we know them today can therefore be set in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and any reference to or information about them from this period up to the first recorded texts in Albanian in the fifteenth century must be the focus of particular attention.

While the crusades and the resulting Angevin conquest of Albania in 1269 provided the Western world with some information about Albania as a geopolitical region, surprisingly few references are made in works of history and in travel narratives to the Albanians themselves. What is known of the period has been compiled by Alain Ducellier in a series of articles and in his masterful 701-page monograph on the Albanian coastline from the 11th to the 15th centuries.

A primary source of information for much of the eastern Mediterranean in the first half of the second millennium are the narratives of pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Although unlike Arnold von Harff in 1497, most pilgrims showed no more than passing interest in the lands they

visited en route to their goal, two Anglo-Irish pilgrims, Symon Semeonis and Hugo Illuminator, whom we may refer to in English as Simon Fitzsimmons und Hugh the Illuminator, visited Albania in 1322 on their way to the Holy Land, and the former vividly recorded what he saw. His account gives us a rare glimpse of the Albanian coast in the first half of the fourteenth century.

Simon Fitzsimmons of the Franciscan Order set out from Clonmel in Ireland in the spring of 1322 with his friend und companion Hugh the Illuminator, and were "seized by a desire to follow the naked Christ in the way of poverty and to run and wander religiously in the course of a most devout pilgrimage to the Holy Land." They travelled through northern Wales to London which he describes as the most famous and richest of all cities within the sun's orbit, to Canterbury, Dover, Wissant, Amiens, Paris, Beaune, Lyon, Avignon, Nice, Genoa, Bobbio, Piacenza, Parma, Mantua, Verona und Vicenza to Venice. There they boarded a merchant vessel for the Holy Land which stopped on its way in Pula, Zadar, Dubrovnik, Ulcinj, Durrës, Corfu, Cephalonia and Crete, where they were first to record the presence of Gypsies on the island, before reaching Alexandria. Much of Simon's travel narrative, known as the *Itinerarium Symonis Semeonis ab Hybernia ad Terram Sanctam*, deals with their experiences in Egypt where Friar Hugh died und where Simon provides much information of interest on Islam und the *Libello de doctrina Machometi* (the book of the doctrine of Mohammed). From Egypt, Simon carried on alone through Gaza to Jerusalem to visit the holy shrines. At this point the narrative, now preserved in a manuscript (No. 407) in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge U.K., breaks off.

The 'Itinerary' of Simon Fitzsimons was first published in Cambridge in 1778 in a now rare edition by James Nasmith under the title *Itinerarium Symonis Simeonis et Hugonis Illuminatoris ad Terram Sanctam*. It has been edited subsequently by Mario Esposito und Eugene Hoade.

The 'Itinerary' contains a wealth of information on matters as varied as customs inspections und procedures, costumes, coinage, raw materials und products of the countries visited und of course on churches und holy sites. On his brief stay on the Albanian coast, Simon records the following impressions:

"Et inde post dies aliquot recedentes, transivimus per Dulcynam civitatem, que est regis Rassie, et navigavimus Durachiam, civitatem olim famosam et in mari et in terra potentem, et imperatori Grecorum subjectam, nunc autem principi Romanye fratri regis Jerusalem predicti, que est in provincia Albanie. Ubi sciendum [est] quod Albanya est provincia inter Slavoniam et Romaniam, per se linguam habens, quam nuper predicus rex Rassie scismaticus suo dominio subjugavit. Ipsi enim Albaneses scismatici sunt, Grecorum utentes ritu et eisdem habitu et gestu in omnibus conformes. Nam Greci raro vel nunquam utuntur caputio, sed capello albo quasi plano in parte anteriori humiliato et in posteriori elevato, ut eorum crines intuentium oculis luculentius appareant, quoniam in crinium longitudine et pucritudine summe gloriantur; Slavy vero, de quibus superius dictum est, tamen capello albo oblongo et rotundo, in cujus summitate nobiles pennam longam figunt, qua facilius a rusticis et villanis distingui valeant atque cognosci. Ipsa autem civitas est in murorum ambitu amplissima et in edificiis vilis et exigua, quia quondam terre motu fuerat funditus eversa, et in ejus eversione ditissimi ejus cives et inhabitores propriis palatiis fuerant, ut dicitur, bene xxiii milia, et mortui sunt. Nunc autem in populo est sterilis, qui et est ritu, habitu et lingua divisus. Inhabatur enim Latinis, Grecis, Judeis perfidis, et barbaris Albanensibus. Apud quos currunt turonenses parvi et quibus xi valent unum Venetum grossum, et currunt tantum valentes per totam Romaniam. Et distat a Ragusia per CC miliaria. Et inde flantibus secundis ventis, transeuntes per Belonam castrum imperatoris Grecorum, et per Corfu

insulam, in qua est civitas nomine Corfu regis Jerusalem prefati, que distat a Durachia per C miliaria...”

”And then after spending a few days, we passed through the city of Ulcinj, which belongs to the King of Rascia, and sailed to Durrës, a city once famous and mighty by land and sea. subject to the Emperor of the Greeks but now belonging to the Prince of Romania, the brother of the aforementioned King of Jerusalem, [this city] being in the province of Albania. It should be known that Albania is a province between Slavonia and Romania, having a language of its own and which the aforementioned schismatic King of Rascia has subjected to his rule. For the Albanians themselves are schismatics, using the rites of the Greeks and are entirely like them in their dress and manner. For the Greeks rarely if ever wear the cowl, but rather a white hat lowered almost flat to the front and raised at the back so that their hair, the length and beauty of which they are extremely proud, may appear more attractive to the eyes of the beholder. The Slavs on the other hand, of whom mention was made above, wear a white hat, oblong and round, on the top of which their nobles stick a big feather in order to be distinguished and recognized more easily by the peasants and common people. The city itself is very extensive in the circuit of its walls, but small and unpretentious in its buildings because it was once razed to the ground by an earthquake, and in the destruction, its wealthiest citizens and inhabitants were buried beneath their own palaces and indeed a good 24,000 are reported to have died. It is now sparsely populated and divided in religion, customs and language. For it is inhabited by Latins, Greeks, perfidious Jews and barbaric Albanians. In use among them are small tournois coins of which eleven are worth one Venetian grosso. They are in use at this rate in all of Romania. This city is 200 miles from Dubrovnik. And then, taking advantage of favourable winds, we continued to Vlora, a fortress of the Emperor of the Greeks, and to the island of Corfu on which there is a city called Corfu belonging to the aforementioned King of Jerusalem, this place being two hundred miles from Durres.”

It is apparent from the narrative that in 1322 the port of Durrës had not recovered entirely from the disastrous earthquake which had struck it half a century earlier. The original population of the city was replaced to a certain extent by an influx of Albanians from the countryside. That Albanian must have been widely spoken on the coastal plains and mountain regions at the time can be inferred from Simon’s initial observation that the province had a language of its own, i.e. Albanian. Within the city of Durrës, however, the ‘barbaric Albanians’ are referred to only fourth, after the urban Latins, Greeks and Jews, an indication that they may not yet have formed the majority group. Interestingly enough, Simon refers to the Albanian barbarians in Dubrovnik too, stating: *”In eadem dominantur Venetii, et ad eam confluunt Sclavi, Barbari, Paterini et alii scismatici negotiatores qui sunt gestu, habitu et lingua Latinis in omnibus diffformes”* (The Venetians dominate in it [Dubrovnik] and Slavs, Barbarians, Paterines and other schismatic merchants frequent it, who are entirely different from the Latins in their customs, dress and language).

Throughout its history from antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century, Durrës had a very hybrid population structure with a strongly varying proportion of Albanians. Only relatively recently have the Albanians come to constitute a definitive majority there, and only in the last quarter of a century have the ubiquitous white hats which Simon Fitzsimons marvelled at in 1322 come to disappear.

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