

*Ermal Baze**

Historical Data on the Life of Albanian Women in the Late Middle Ages (14th-15th Centuries)

The situation of the Albanian women has attracted the attention of foreign Albanologists and researchers, starting from the 19th century (François Charles Hugues Laurent Pouqueville,¹ Johannes George Von Hahn,² Edith Durham³) until present day (Roberto Morozzo della Rocca,⁴ Bernd Jürgen Fischer⁵). Nonetheless, in their research (with the exception of Pierre Cabanes⁶) the woman question has not yet been analyzed in depth. As far as concerns the Albanian historiography, special papers and scientific studies (monographs)⁷ by historians, eth-

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¹ François Charles Hugues Laurent Pouqueville, *Voyage dans la Grèce* (Paris: 1820-21).

² Johannes George Von Hahn, *Reise durch die Gebirge des Drin und Wardar* (Wien: 1867).

³ Edith Durham, *Bregja e Ballkanit dhe Vepra të tjera për Shqipërinë dhe Shqiptarët* (The Burden of the Balkans and other Works for Albania and the Albanians) (Tirana: Naum Veqilharxhi, 1998).

⁴ Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, *Kombi dhe feja në Shqipëri: 1920-1924* (Nation and Religion in Albania: 1920-1924) (Tirana: Elena Gjika, 1994).

⁵ Bernd J. Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpyekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri* (King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania) (Tirana: Çabej, 1997).

⁶ Pierre Cabanes, "Vendi i gruas në Epirin antic" (The Position of Woman in Ancient Epirus), *Iliria* 2 (1983): 193-209; Neritan Ceka, *Ilirët deri te Shqiptarët* (From Illyrians to Albanians) (Tirana: Migjeni, 2015), 387-8.

⁷ Injaz Zamputi, "Pozita shoqërore e gruas malësore shqiptare sipas Kanunit" (The Social Position of the Malesori Women According to the Canon), *Buletin i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës* 2 (1961): 101-23; Beqir Sinani, "Lëvizja për emancipimin e femrës në vitet 1920-1924" (The Movement for the Emancipation of Women in the Years 1920-1924), *Studime Historike* 1 (1986); Pal Doçi, *Vetëqeverisja e Mirditës: vështrim etnologjik e historik* (Mirdita Self-government: Ethnological and Historical Perspective) (Tirana: Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1996); Fatmira Musaj, *Gruaja në Shqipëri në vitet 1912-1939* (Women in Albania in the Years 1912-1939) (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 2002); Eduart Caka, "Disa të dhëna mbi rolin dhe të drejtat e gruas në Shqipëri gjatë shekujve XVII-XVIII" (Some Data on the Role and the Rights of Women in Albania during the 17th- 18th Centuries),

nologists,⁸ anthropologists, jurists and customary law scholars,⁹ social-ogists¹⁰ etc., mainly have in focus women in the Ottoman period until the 20th century.

The present paper is based on a wide documentary material, of which the most used are: the Byzantine period documents on the history of the Albanians (7th-15th centuries),¹¹ the *Statutes of Shkodra*,¹² the documents on the history of Albania of the 15th century (years 1400-1405, 1406-1410, and 1479-1506),¹³ and also the 1416-1417 *Cadastre and*

Studime Historike 1-2 (2015): 69-87; Gentiana Kera–Enriketa Papa, “Karakteristikat e familjes shqiptare sipas regjistrimit të popullsisë në vitin 1918” (Characteristics of the Albanian Family according to the 1918 Census), *Politika dhe Shoqëria* 5, no. 1/10 (2002): 83-96.

⁸ Abaz Dojaka, “Karakterit i lidhjeve martesore para çlirimit” (The Character of Marital Ties before Liberation), *Etnografia shqiptare* 11 (1981); Kahreman Ulqini, “E drejta zakonore përballë së drejtës kanonike dhe shariatit” (Customary Law versus Ecclesiastical Law and Sharia), *Etnografia shqiptare* 16 (1989).

⁹ Ismet Elezi, *E drejta zakonore e Labërisë në planin krahasues* (The Customary Law of Labëria in a Comparative Plan) (Tirana: Tirana University Press, 1994); Aleks Luarasi, *Marrëdhëniet Familjare* (Family Relations), (Tirana: Luarasi, 2001).

¹⁰ Zyhdi Dervishi, *Gratë në syrin e ciklonit të sfidave dhe perspektiva: trajtesë sociologjike e problematikës sociokulturore të grave shqiptare në vitet '90 të shekullit XX* (Women in the Eye of the Cyclone of Challenges and Perspectives: A Sociological Approach to the Socio-cultural Problems of Albanian Women in the '90s of the 20th Century) (Tirana: Dora D'Istria, 2000).

¹¹ *Dokumente të periudhës bizantine për historinë e Shqipërisë: shek. VII-XV* (Documents of the Byzantine Period for the History of Albania: 7th-15th centuries) [hereafter DBS], ed. Koço Bozhori (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1978).

¹² *Statuti di Scutari della prima metà del secolo XIV con le addizione fino al 1469*, ed. Lucia Nadin (Roma: Viella, 2002).

¹³ *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shekullit XV* (Documents on the History of Albania of the 15th Century), 1 (1400-1405) [hereafter DHS 1], ed. Injaz Zamputi–Luan Malltezi (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1987); *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shekullit XV* (Documents on the History of Albania of the 15th Century), 2 (1406-1410) [hereafter DHS 2], ed. Injaz Zamputi–Pranvera Bogdani (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1984); *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërisë* (15th Century Documents on the History of Albania), 4 (1479-1506): Part I (1479-1499) [hereafter DHS 1479-1506, Part I], ed. Injac Zamputi (Tirana: University of Tirana, Institute of History and Linguistics, 1967); *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë 1479-1506* (Documents on the History of Albania 1479-1506): Part II (1499-1506) [hereafter DHS 1499-1506,

Concessions Register for the District of Shkodra.¹⁴ Also, *Gjon Muzaka's Chronicle*,¹⁵ the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*,¹⁶ and the *Kanun of Scanderbeg* (The Canon of Scanderbeg)¹⁷ are used as supplementary sources.

In distinction from the customary law data, a characteristic of the local governing of rural and mountainous areas in Albania, the documentary sources give considerable information on the role and importance of women living in the autonomous cities during the Albanian medieval history and shed light on the legal protection of their personality, dignity, and honor. The earliest historical data on some of the most important rights of the Albanian women are to be found in the Byzantine sources dating back to the first decades and the beginning of the second half of the 13th century a woman's right to ask for a divorce,¹⁸ to manage or bequeath their own property,¹⁹ and other similar acts.²⁰ In a letter of the Ohrid archbishop, Dhimitër Homatjanoj,²¹ of May 1223,

Part II], ed. Injaz Zamputi (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1979).

¹⁴ *Regjistri i Kadastrës dhe i Koncesioneve për rrethin e Shkodrës 1416-1417* (Cadastre and Concessions Register for the District of Shkodra 1416-1417) [hereafter RKKS], ed. Injac Zamputi (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1977).

¹⁵ Karl Hopf, *Chroniques gréco-romanes inédites ou peu connues* (Berlin: Librairie de Weidmann, 1873). Used for publication after the translation of Dhori Qiriazi: Gjon Muzaka, *Memorje* (Memories) (Tirana: Toena, 1996) and after the translation of Pëllumb Xhufit from the Italian copy in his monograph: *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt: Berati dhe Vlora në shekujt XII-XV* (From the Palaeologians to the Muzakaj: Berat and Vlora in the 12th-15th Centuries) (Tirana: "55," 2009), 380-456; *Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka* (History and Genealogy of the Muzaka Dynasty), written by Don John Muzaka, Despot of Epirus.

¹⁶ Shtjefën Gjeçovi, *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* (The Canon of Lekë Dukagjini) [hereafter KLD], (Tirana: Parliament of Albania, 2001).

¹⁷ Frano Ilia, *Kanuni i Skanderbegut* (The Canon of Scanderbeg) (Milot: Rosa, 1993).

¹⁸ DBS, doc. 26, 55.

¹⁹ DBS, doc. 28, 60-62: "The testament is legal, when includes all those who enjoy the heritage right. A landowner in Dibra becomes peer."

²⁰ DBS, doc. 45, 82-84: "February 1258—The sale of vineyard near the city of Durrës."

²¹ Dhimitër Homatjanoj concluded the studies for jurisprudence in Constantinople and around 1200 was sent in Ohrid as cartophilax (one of the most important aids of the patriarch) of the bishopric, where he carried out this duty until 1216, when he became archbishop. He held this position until 1234. See DBS, doc. 28, 58.

it is mentioned: “[...] the so-called Kabasilina, who was within the castle of Durrës, bequeathing without being present with her sons and not mentioning the latter [i.e., her sons] in the testament.”²²

Similarly to the Byzantine sources, the Statutes of Shkodra give relatively important information, in which the western-fashioned archetypic role of a woman’s importance in the society is reflected. In a series of dispositions, special place is also occupied by penal actions against morality, which evidences the legal and penal protection of a woman’s personality, dignity, and honor. The law was very sensitive towards the complaints from women about insults²³ and the exercise of physical or sexual violence²⁴ against them. The punitive measures were serious and didn’t spare anyone, whatever his social position or status was, without making any kind of distinction between secular persons or the clergy. The fact that a vast variety of different situations and combinations was included in the legal framework on this aspect convinces us that the respect of the women’s rights and dignity in that period was true and was taken seriously. If a married woman complained for rape, beating or robbery against a cleric, then she had to be trusted even without witnesses.²⁵ The cleric was immediately fined with fifty hyperpers, half of which were transferred to the bishop, one fourth to the count (representative of the Serb royal authority in the city of Shkodra),²⁶ and one fourth was granted to the claimant woman.²⁷ The statutory norms also provided for the cases when a man raped an honest and unmarried woman: in these circumstances, if the man was also unmarried, he was

²² DBS, doc. 28, 61.

²³ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 255.

²⁴ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 256: “If it’s proven that a secular person touches or beats a woman, or violates her home, this is condemned with a fine of eight hyperpers. If violates another woman at the same way, he had to pay eight hyperpers, half to the count and the other half to the claimant.”

²⁵ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 200.

²⁶ *Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae Mediae Aetatis Illustrantia* (collegerunt et digesserunt Dr. Ludovicus de Thalloczy, Dr. Konstantin Jireček et Dr. Emilianus de Sufflay), vol. I, (Annos 344-1343 Tabulamque geographician continens), Vindobonae MCMXIII, reedition, Tiranë, Prishtinë: “Dukagjini”–Pejë, 2002, document 527 (hereafter *Acta Albaniae I*).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

forced to legally marry her.²⁸ If they were both married, the man was punished with a fine of fifty hyperpers, equally distributed between the count and the woman.²⁹ Unlike the first case, when the woman was believed even without witnesses, in this situation the woman had to prove herself by bringing convincing evidence.³⁰

Nevertheless, in the coastal Albanian cities (Durrës, Lezha, Shkodra, Drisht, Ulqin, Tivar) under the administration of the Republic of San Marco (1392-1479), the question of disrespecting the statutes, the rules and old customs by the Venetian authorities started to cause dissatisfactions among the local population.³¹ In the municipalities of Durrës and Drisht, cases of abuse and violation of even the elementary norms of morality against the local women by the Venetian local governors are well documented: “The governor of Durrës, Pietro Arimondo, as it is seen from the process against him on October 29, 1409, had had arrested the inhabitant of Durrës, Kirana, to force her to perjury that allegedly the testament bequeathed by the chancellor of Durrës, Nicola Parma (with whom the Venetian governor had to settle old scores), was a fake testament. The governor exercised his menaces to force her to act as he wished, otherwise he would have tortured her with the most barbarian tools. And he hanged the chancellor of Durrës after forced Kirana to perjury [...]” “Heustak Grioni one of the ugliest figures that we the citizens of Drisht knew on 1401-1402, in the most banditry way that can be imagined, entered in the house of the citizen George Varshi, when the latter was not there to rape his wife. In front of the powerful anger who erupted in Drisht, the Seignory was forced to move away her citizen without concluding his time of service and to somehow preserve the discredited prestige of the state stained by its governor.”³²

The *Statutes of Shkodra* also included very severe punishment measures for women of dubious morals, who were not allowed to wear hats or to live and share company with the city’s noble ladies. Those

²⁸ Ibid, chap. 201.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Luan Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit shqiptar gjatë sundimit venedikas* (Albanian Coastal Cities during Venetian Rule) (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1988), 217.

³² Malltezi, *Qytetet e bregdetit*, 220-2.

women who violated the rules and conducted forbidden activities were beaten with sticks and within three days were banished from the city: “If a woman is proved that is vicious from the testimony of two or three men, she is not to be allowed to carry a hat on the head, as our custom is, nor to share company at her will. She is not permitted to stay or dwell close to the noble ladies. If she infringes these orders, she will be punished with eight hyperpers that will be divided between the count and the claimant. If its proven that a vicious woman makes dirty works or seeks to ruin the others, she had to leave our city within three days and if this deadline is not respected, she will be punished with a fine of eight hyperpers, fustigated in the roads of the city and at the end to be evicted and never return to our land.”³³ Along with the prostitutes, they were excluded from the right to inherit the wealth of their family: “[...] when the daughter ends as prostitute, even if the father and mother are dead, the brothers have the power to exclude their prostitute sister from the heritage; if this sister has not living father, mother or brothers, but only a sister that is a fair woman, then to the latter should pass the part of the above defamatory sister.”³⁴ It is quite certain that these severe sanctions were mainly taken to cut the way of promoting and developing the whoredom, which was widespread in the coastal cities of the Eastern Adriatic. “In all the cities of the seashore” –says Milan Šufflay– “certainly existed brothels,” and this is proved by the “whores” mentioned in the Statutes of Budva (1350) and in the “battessa di bordello” that is mentioned in Ragusa (1400).³⁵

The husband in general had to show respect to his wife and should not abandon her because of dowry lack or her little wealth.³⁶ Her dowry should not be alienated or wasted by the husband,³⁷ because protecting

³³ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 87.

³⁴ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 171.

³⁵ Milan V. Šufflay, *Städte und Burgen Albaniens* (Wien und Leipzig, 1924); Used after the edition in Albanian prepared by Luan Malltezi, *Qytetet dhe kështjellat e Shqipërisë, kryesisht në mesjetë* (Cities and Castles of Albania, mainly in the Middle Ages) (Tirana: Onufri, 2009), 96.

³⁶ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 265: “The man who enters his home a woman as a wife, cannot discard her out because she has not kept dowry in the house. The dowry must be by reason sought. He that banishes the wife is fined with eight hyperpers, half for the count and half for the claimant.”

³⁷ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 165.

the wife's wealth was his right. Also, he was not permitted to use his wife's dowry to liquidate the blood tax or the urazba: "To no man was allowed to take something from the wife's dowry to pay a blood feud or urazba. The commune should protect the woman, while the husband who commits such a foolish action had to pay it himself."³⁸

According to the statutes, both consorts should have reciprocity relations between them, situation that is reflected in bequeathing each other when one of them passed away.³⁹ Additionally, not only the husband but also the wife had the right to draft a testament.⁴⁰ The wife had the right to keep her part of the inheritance from the father- and mother-in law and also the right to bequeath: "The daughter and the woman in general has the right to issue a testament, starting from the age of twelve years old and on."⁴¹ The women's rights to file a lawsuit,⁴² draft and inherit a testament,⁴³ take profit from it,⁴⁴ warrant,⁴⁵ have legal representatives on different issues of their wealth,⁴⁶ and to be church warden (epitrope) to apply the testament's dispositions⁴⁷ are evidenced by the Dubrovnik archival documents (Državni u Dubrovniku) at the beginning of the 15th century and this is valid not only for Shkodra and Durrës, but also for the other coastal cities of Albania, such as Ulqin and Tivar. On the basis of Dubrovnik's and other Venetian documentary sources, women who possessed properties and assets⁴⁸ and had the right

³⁸ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 266.

³⁹ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 168.

⁴⁰ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 196.

⁴¹ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 186.

⁴² DHS 2, doc. 374.

⁴³ DHS 1, doc. 24, 65, 121, 132, 160, 161.

⁴⁴ DHS 1, doc. 295, 374, 403. DHS 2 doc. 214.

⁴⁵ DHS 1, doc. 274, 285, 377, 408, 428.

⁴⁶ DHS 1, doc. 228: "27 June 1402—The legal representative of a woman from Tivar withdraws in Dubrovnik what the daughter has left to her after death."

⁴⁷ DHS 1, doc. 410.

⁴⁸ DHS 1, doc. 39, 84, 158, 173, 228; DHS 2, doc. 129, 366.

to administer,⁴⁹ donate⁵⁰ and sell⁵¹ them for different economic interests are mentioned in these cities.⁵²

In the *Cadastral and Concessions Register for the District of Shkodra 1416-1417*, drafted by the Venetian administration regarding the properties in possession of “the Adriatic Queen” in the Albanian territories and the fiscal system on the inhabitants living within her authority, the term “woman’s right” is often mentioned for various cases of women’s, inhabitants of Shkodra, land possessions in the city and the surroundings, among whom there were also widows.⁵³ In general, women inhabitants of Shkodra of the 14th and 15th centuries had a status that would be envied even in the centuries to come. According to the statutes, the family wealth was an equal property: “Everything that husband and wife gain together is considered equal, viz half belongs to the husband and half to the wife.”⁵⁴ One could compare this to the article of the *Lekë Dukagjini’s Canun*: “The woman bellows to carry as much as she could in her husband’s home.”⁵⁵ “If the husband beats the wife, the canon does not blame him, and either the parents can’t redeem the beating”⁵⁶ or “the woman that leaves her husband’s home, has no right to take anything but her clothes.”⁵⁷ In this direction, some improvements and novelties were brought in the family law by Scanderbeg, who changed the old customary law that allowed the husband to divorce the wife without reason and without granting her any asset.⁵⁸ *The Canon of*

⁴⁹ DHS 1, doc. 428: “20 April 1404—A woman from Tivar presents a general power of attorney to extract and administer the properties and the assets that has inherited in Tivar and surroundings.”

⁵⁰ DHS 1, doc. 63: “6 September 1400—The widow of a shoemaker from Durrës donates a house in Durrës,” doc. 239: “4 August 1402—The wife of Nicholas Spani from Drisht distributes the assets of the husband in Albania.”

⁵¹ DHS 1 doc. 339; DHS 2, doc. 364.

⁵² DHS 1, doc. 210: “28 April 1402—The daughter of a man from Tivar in Dubrovnik has economic interests in the city of Tivar.”

⁵³ RKKS, doc. 2/a, 3/a, 20/a, 30/a, doc. 9/a, 9/b, 10/b, 11/a, 19/b, 21/a, 25/b, 30/b, 35/a.

⁵⁴ *Statuti di Scutari*, chap. 166.

⁵⁵ KLD, chap. 29.

⁵⁶ KLD, chap., 28.

⁵⁷ KLD, chap., 31.

⁵⁸ Aleks Luarasi, “E drejta në shtetin e Skënderbeut” (Legal law in the state of Skanderbeg), in *Studime për Epokën e Skënderbeut* 3 (1989): 51.

Scanderbeg –Aleks Luarasi ascertains– “previewed only two legal causes to divorce the wife: stealing and the conjugal unfaithfulness (dishonesty affairs).”⁵⁹ According to *The Canon of Scanderbeg*, the wife could be divorced for other causes also, but in these cases the husband was obliged to give her part of the conjugal wealth recognizing her contribution in the common (home) wealth.⁶⁰ Divorcing the wife without reason was also previewed in Scanderbeg’s Canon, but in this case she would get half of the couple’s private land to secure her life.⁶¹ However, the changes that Scanderbeg brought to the customary law were partial and temporary.⁶² After his death and Albania’s occupation by the Ottomans, most of these rules were abolished.

In relation with the above-mentioned rules of the customary law, in the positive law,⁶³ as it is represented by the Statutes of Shkodra, the protection of a woman’s moral integrity and right to wealth proves in a certain extent the respect of her personality and, furthermore, the Shkodra and other coastal communes’ citizens’ development and emancipation in the Late Middle Age Albania (14th-15th centuries).

The sources and the chronicles inform us about a considerable part of the noble Albanian women of the 14th-15th centuries. The dynasty marriages and marriage alliances in medieval Europe, as everywhere else, were first of all a political act, through which the political alliances with the neighbors were strengthened, and they also led to the enlargement of the principalities’ territorial–political formation during the

⁵⁹ Luarasi, “E drejta në shtetin,” 51.

⁶⁰ Aleks Luarasi, *Historia e shtetit dhe e së drejtës në Shqipëri* (History of the State and Law in Albania) (Tirana: Luarasi University Press, 2007⁴), 189.

⁶¹ Luarasi, *Historia e shtetit*, 189.

⁶² Petrika Thëngjilli, *Historia e popullit shqiptar 395-1875* (History of the Albanian People 395-1875) (Tirana: Tirana University Press, 1999), 169.

⁶³ Pëllumb Xhufi, “Statutet e Shkodrës mes së drejtës pozitive dhe së drejtës zakonore” (Statutes of Shkodra between Positive Law and Customary Law), in *Statutet e Shkodrës nga gjysma e parë e shek. XIV, me shtesa deri më 1469*, (Statutes of Shkodra from the First Half of the 14th Century, with Additions up to 1469), anastatic edition (Tirana: IDK, 2017), 27; In the case of Albania, and not only, the positive and the customary law have coexisted until the moment of the modern state establishment, each of whom having the proper implementation zone: the first mainly reigned in the prosperous agricultural areas and cities, while the second was thriving in the hinterland mountainous areas.

Middle Ages and the spread of their influence. Such family alliances were established during the 14th-15th centuries in almost all the noble families of the time, as were the Arianiti, Muzaka, Topia, Dukagjini, Zaharia, Kastrioti, Balshaj, Zenebishi, Ohrid, and Dibra's Gropaj, the lords of Prespa families etc.⁶⁴ Also, there is no lack of cases of dynasty marriages and family alliances of a political character of the Albanian nobility with foreign nobles, mainly coming from the region and the Adriatic shores.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See also *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 293.

⁶⁵ Among the first Albanian nobility marriages with foreigners in the Byzantine sources is mentioned that of Demetrios, ruler of Albania's principality (between 1208 and 1216), with Komnena, the daughter of Serbia's great župan, Stefan Nemanja (1196-1227), in 1208. Approximately at the same time is mentioned the marriage of the pansevast sevast Grigor Kamona, Governor of the Despotate of Epirus, with the daughter of Jihn Progoni, second ruler of the Albania's principality in 1198-1208; DBS, doc. 26 and 27, 54-60; The aunt of the chronicler John Muzaka, Helena, was married with the Venetian noble Filippo Barelli, a Ragusa citizen, former administrator of the Balsha family. John Zenebishi, the ruler of Gjirokastra and Vagenetia until 1418, gave his sister in marriage to the Italian Petrotto d'Altavilla, heir of the earlier Norman dynasty, who ruled Southern Italy during 11th-12th centuries. According to John Muzaka, Komnen Arianiti was married with the daughter of a certain Nicolò Sacati, former baron of two cities in Sendia (according to D. Shuteriqi, it must be Serbia). Despina, the daughter of Ajdin Klope (ruler of Vrezda) and of Helena Muzaka (sister of Andrea Muzaka, grandfather of the chronicler John Muzaka) married with the sanjak bey of Ciorne, Ali Bey. In the beginning of the second half of the 14th century, George Balsha married the daughter of Vukašin Mrnjavčević (kral-ruler of the Western Macedonia and co-ruler with the King of Serbia Stefan Uroš V from 1365 to 1371), Olivera Mrnjavčević. George Arianiti in parallel to the first marriage with Maria Muzaka (sister of Jihn II and aunt of the chronicler John Muzaka) nearly at the end of the '40s of the 15th century, married the Italian Pietrina Francone from the city of Lecce (in Southern Italy), the daughter of one of the vassals of Naples Alfonso V, Oliverio Francone, "barone di Taurisano," Governor of the city of Lecce. Around 1461 Angelina Arianiti (1440-1520), (daughter of George Arianiti from his first marriage according to the chronicle of Gjon Muzaka; on the contrary, according to the scholar and German Orientalist Franz Babinger, she is the daughter of George Arianiti from his second marriage), married the despot of Serbia, Stefan Branković (1458-9), known as the "Blind Stefan" (son of Đurađ Branković, despot of Serbia from 1427 to 1456). The son of Scanderbeg, Gjon Kastrioti (1456-1502), married the third daughter of the despot Lazar Branković of Serbia (1456-8) and Helena Paleologue (1431-7), Jerina Branković. (Note of the author: There are plenty of other examples, which we are not mentioning here); *Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka*, 432, 433, 435,

One should emphasize the fact that the outcome of these alliances was not always successful; in many cases they caused dissatisfaction and political or military conflicts among the Albanian noble families in the beginning of the second half of the 15th century. The chronicler Gjon Muzaka mentions that one of his sisters, named Zanfina or Suina, was married to Muzak Topia⁶⁶ around 1460, at a time when these two families lacked the glow they had once.⁶⁷ But even this relation didn't last for long because Muzak Topia soon divorced his wife to marry Mamica Kastrioti, Scanderbeg's sister. "Lord Scanderbeg ruined the marriage of the above-mentioned lord Muzakë Topia with lady Zanfinë Muzaka, without taking into consideration the God and nothing else nor the children they had and married him with his own sister, Lady Mamica."⁶⁸

This incident, that the chronicler Gjon Muzaka attributes to Scanderbeg's intervention and influence, complicated the relations between the Muzaka family and the Topia and Kastrioti families. This must be the reason a later Scanderbeg "would grab from Muzaka family after the death of Gjin II Muzaka [father of the chronicler Gjon Muzaka (author's note)], Tomonishta, i.e., the small Myzeqe [...]"⁶⁹ Together with the Muzaka family, included in the group of the families dissatisfied towards Scanderbeg, was also Moisi Golemi, an important personage of the time, to whom the leader of the Kastrioti family inherited his possessions in Dibra.⁷⁰ The marriage of Moisi Golemi with Zanfina or

436, 448; Milan Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët* (Serbs and Albanians) (Tirana: Barghini, 2001), 132; Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi, "Aranitët, emri dhe gjenealogjia" (Aranites, Name and Genealogy), in *Studime për Epokën e Skënderbeut* (Studies on the Skanderbeg Era) (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1989), 64, 68, 75; Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 292.

⁶⁶ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 450.

⁶⁷ Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 304. The author dates the marriage of Zanfina or Suina Muzaka with Muzak Topia around 1460, while the scholar D. S. Shuteriqi on page 65 of his paper entitled "Aranitët, emri dhe gjenealogjia" (Aranites, Name and Genealogy) dates the marriage in 1445.

⁶⁸ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 451.

⁶⁹ *Op.cit.*, 453.

⁷⁰ *Op.cit.*

Suina Muzaka,⁷¹ the woman divorced by Muzak Topia, expressed exactly one of the causes of the Albanian big feudal lords' rebellion against Scanderbeg.⁷²

These dynasty and family marriage alliances were a characteristic of the European Middle Ages in general (also including here the Balkan region), and beyond any doubt they redounded in giving a leading social-political character to the noble women of local or foreign origin who left their traces not only in the history of the region, but on both sides of the Adriatic Sea.

It is worth individuating the Serb Nemanja family and the French Angevins, around 1250, when Uroš I (1243-76) married the French princess Helene, who "was praised for her sharp way of speech, kindness, generosity and spirituality."⁷³ Not without reason the administration of the Catholic enclaves of the Serb Kingdom, firstly that of Dioklea (Žeta, Monte Negro), were set under her direct control:⁷⁴ "The devout Helena had founded the Franciscan monasteries in front of the gates of Tivar and Kotorr."⁷⁵ She was provably a ruler in these territories until 1314, the year of her death, while her sister, Maria de Chaur, was the ruler of Ulqin since 1283, when she was honored with the title "domina Ulcinii." "Maria, sister of queen Helena, was married to Anselm de Chaur, who in 1273 is mentioned as general captain of Charles I in Albania. Maria lived as a widow (since 1281) in the country of her sister, where she was granted with a residence in Ulqin."⁷⁶

The pretext of protecting Catholicism by the French queen of medieval Serbia explicitly explains the reason a good part of the east-Adriatic-coast Albanian communes with an overwhelming Catholic popula-

⁷¹ Shuteriqi, "Aranitët, emri dhe gjenealogjia," 65.

⁷² Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 304.

⁷³ Konstantin Jireček, *Historia e Serbëve* (History of Serbs), part I (up to 1371) (Tirana: "55," 2010), 356.

⁷⁴ Acta Albaniae I, doc. 509; Pëllumb Xhufi, *Dilemat e Arbërit* (The Dilemmas of Arber) (Tirana: Pegi, 2006), 283.

⁷⁵ Konstantin Jireček, *Historia e Serbëve* (History of Serbs), part II (1371-1537) (Tirana: "55," 2010), 41.

⁷⁶ Acta Albaniae I, doc. 470; Jireček, *Historia e Serbëve*, part I, 357.

tion, such as Tivar, Ulqin, and Shkodra, enjoyed the status of local autonomy, i.e., of communal self-governing and self-organization, while they respected the sovereignty of the Serb kingdom's Crown.⁷⁷

This was the case with the efforts of Komnena Balšić with the Venetians before May 1386, when an Ottoman expedition led by Sultan Murad I himself was expected against Vlora.⁷⁸ Komnena Balšić, the eldest daughter of despot Andrea II Musachi, was the ruler of Kanina and Vlora and all their surroundings and widow of Balša II [the third son of Balša I, founder of the Balšić dynasty (died 1367)], who died in the Battle of Savra on September 18, 1385, against the troops of Charles Thopia, who had formed an alliance with the Ottomans.⁷⁹ According to the monograph *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt* of the medievalist P. Xhufi, in May 1386 the Republic of Venice presented its proposals to the lady of Vlora: "in the first version, Venice sought that Kanina and Vlora with the surroundings to be given unconditionally to Signory and with all rights and jurisdictions that Komnena herself had. If Komnena wouldn't accept this solution, Venice was ready to offer a second version, after which Komnena Balsha, as long as she would live, would get all the revenues extracted from her possessions; but at the same time she would face all the necessary expenses for their defense. Meanwhile, a unit of Venetian bowmen (ballistarii) should be established without delay in the tower of Kanina and should act under Signory orders. That was the maximum of the San Marco Republic engagement promise in defense of Vlora."⁸⁰

Furthermore, the Senate of the Republic of Venice warned the Venetian citizens that none of them should marry either lady Komnena Balsha of Vlora or her daughter; otherwise he would be punished by imprisonment.⁸¹ This decision proved explicitly that the Signoria

⁷⁷ Ermal Baze, *Një qytet me statute: Shkodra në gjysmën e parë të shekullit XIV* (A City with Statutes: Shkodra in the First Half of the 14th Century) (Tirana: Muzgu, 2013), 37-8.

⁷⁸ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 429-30; Peter Bartl, *Shqiptarët: nga Mesjeta deri në ditët tona* (Albanians: From Middle Ages to the Present) (Tirana: IDK, 2017), 38-40.

⁷⁹ Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 304.

⁸⁰ Xhufi, *op.cit.*, 315.

⁸¹ Xhufi, *op.cit.*.

wanted Vlora and Kanina for itself, by not encouraging a joint Albanian-Venetian government in the territory in question, which could implicate the “Queen of the Adriatic” in the problematic relations that the female ruler of Vlora had with the Ottomans. Venice sought to build relationships based solely on their own interests, free of the historical baggage and grievances of others.⁸²

Komnena Balsha would open the lengthy series of treaties with Venice regarding the question of her possessions, in February⁸³ and in June 1389, when the ruler of Vlora took an extreme stance by expressing her readiness to give the Venetian Seigniorship Vlora and the castle of Kanina, although under certain conditions.⁸⁴ But the Venetian authorities declined once more the proposal of Komnena Balsha because Corfu, Butrint⁸⁵ and later Durrës (1392) would be sufficient for the Signoria to secure its territory in the lower Adriatic and northern Ionian sea. The last negotiation of Komnena Balsha with the Venetians was that of autumn 1395 (when she is mentioned as a ruler for the last time), when she sent a delegation to Venice and presented her proposals. Under the pressure of the Ottomans and of the precarious health situation of Komnena Balsha, the latter accepted to surrender Vlora, Kanina, and Parg, from which she profited 9,000 golden ducats per year, towards an annual provision of 7,000 ducats, as long as Komnena and her daughter⁸⁶ would be alive.⁸⁷ Even this last proposal was not at all taken into consideration by the Republic of Venice.

⁸² Xhufi, *op.cit.*, 316.

⁸³ Xhufi, *op.cit.*, 318-9.

⁸⁴ Xhufi, *op.cit.*, 322.

⁸⁵ Roberto Cessi, *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia*, vol. 1 (Milano: Casa Editrice Giuseppe Principato), 350.

⁸⁶ Giuseppe Gelcich, *Zeta dhe Dinastia e Balshajve* (Zeta and the Balshaj Dynasty) (Tirana: “55,” 2009), 95. Balsha II had no other children with Komnena Muzaka; one daughter, Rugina, after his death ruled together with her mother Vlora and Kanina, which she inherited from her ancestors.

⁸⁷ Konstantin Jireček, “Valona in Mittelalter,” in *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen*, ed. Dr. Ludwig von Thallóczy (München und Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1916). It was used after the translation in Albanian by Mustafa Merlika-Kruja: Konstantin Jireček, “Vlora në Mesjetë,” in *Vëzhgime iliro-shqiptare*, ed. Dr. Ludwig Von Thallóczy (Shkodër: Camaj-Pipa, 2004), 136; Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 323.

In September 1396 as rulers of Vlora and Kanina are mentioned Mrkša Žarković (1396-1414),⁸⁸ son of the Žeta ruler, and Rugina Balsha, daughter of Balsha II and Komnena (Muzaka–Balsha), who would rule these territories until 1417 (even after the death of her husband in 1414).⁸⁹ The marriage of Mrkša with Rugina,⁹⁰ celebrated in 1391, re-consolidated the relations between the rulers of Vlora and Žeta, which were interrupted after the murder of Balsha II in the battle of Savër.⁹¹ The marriage had to be sanctioned by the Holy Synod of Constantinople in 1394, due to the kinship of the couple: Mrkša's mother, Teodora (a Serb noble from Dejanović family), married after 1371 Rugina's uncle, Gjergj I Balsha (1362-78).⁹²

Rugina Balsha, the only ruler of Vlora after Mrkša's death in 1414, under the pressure of the Ottoman threat continued the negotiations and pleas for help and protection of her possessions from Venice with a humbleness worthy to a woman ruler, as was also the case of her mother, Komnena Balsha. The efforts of Rugina Balsha's delegation at the beginning of February 1415 and the end of January 1416⁹³ in the Republic of San Marco faced the indifference and apathetic stance of the Venetian authorities. When the Ottoman commander Hamza bey Evrenoz conquered Berat, Kanina, and Vlora in June 1417, Rugina Balsha together with her family and court moved firstly to Corfu and in 1421 in Ragusa, where she also deposited her treasure.⁹⁴ There is no historical source mentioning Rugina Balsha after 1421.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 441.

⁹⁰ *Op.cit.*

⁹¹ Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 324. Even after the murder of Balsha II in Savër, the Balsha family continued to be called rulers of Vlora. According to the Venetian chronicler and historian Marin Sanudo Junior (1466-1536), Gjergj II Strazimir Balsha pretended to rule the territories that belonged to his ancestors, despite the fact that the Balshaj family possessions in his time were considerably corrugated. Thus, even after the tragedy in Savër, Gjergj Strazimir Balsha considered himself "suzerain of the territories from Vlora to Berat."

⁹² Jireček, "Vlora në Mesjetë," 135; Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 324.

⁹³ Jireček, *op.cit.*, 332-3.

⁹⁴ Jireček, *op.cit.*, 136.

⁹⁵ Jireček, *op.cit.*

Another noble woman with political ambitions, progeny of the above mentioned families, was Evdokia Balsha, daughter of Gjergj I Balsha and Teodora, which was at the same time cousin of Rugina Balsha and stepsister of Mrkša.⁹⁶ Around 1402, Evdokia married in the city of Vlora (in the territory ruled by her brother) with the Italian despot of Ioannina Ezau Buondelmonte Acciaiuoli (1385-1411), after he divorced his second wife, Irena Shpata, sister of Gjin Bua Shpata, ruler of Arta and the surroundings (1359-99).⁹⁷ Reference on the marriage of Evdokia Balsha can be found in a document from Ragusa of July 11 and 14, 1402, where the Council of Ragusa decided to send a gift of 100 hyperpers to Mrkša's sister, and also offered to the latter an armed Ragusan ship to escort his sister to her husband.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *Cronaca dei Tocco di Cefalonia di Anonimo*, Prolegomeni-Testo Critico traduzione di Giuseppe Schirò (Junior) (Roma: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1975), 277. *Burime tregimtare bizantine për historinë e Shqipërisë shek. X-XV* (Byzantine Narrative Sources on the History of Albania c. X-XV), ed. Koço Bozhori-Filip Liço (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1975), 277: Chronicle of Tocco.

⁹⁷ Ibid; Konstantin Jireček, "Witwe und die Söhne des Despoten Esau von Epirus," in *Byzantisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher* 1 (1920): 5; For more see: Giuseppe Schirò (Junior), "Evdokia Balšič di Gianina," in *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta* 8 (1964): 383-91; Koço Bozhori, "Chronicle of the Tocco as Source on the History of the National Formation of Southern Albanians at the E of the XIV Century and in the First Quarter of the XV Century," *Studime Historike* 3 (1976): 183, 187. The Italian despot of Ioannina, Ezau Buondelmonte Acciaiuoli, married in 1396 with Irena Shpata, mother of Maurice Shpata, ruler of Arta principality, but divorced in 1402 to marry with Evdokia Balsha. According to the *Chronicle of the Tocco*, after the death of Gjin Bua Shpata on October 29, 1399, head of the principality was crowned Muriq Shpata, Gjin's nephew and son of Sguro Bua Shpata (Gjin's brother), who was married with a French Countess, Mirsi Makazanin. After the battle of Ankara of 1402, Maurice Shpata not only improved the relations with the Ottomans, but also relaxed them with the despot Ezau of Ioannina, who was Muriq's stepfather. Moreover, Ioannina's Ezau asked the hand of Muriq's daughter for his son born from his marriage with the Albanian Evdokia Balsha, daughter of Gjergj I Balsha. A part of this note is taken from *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 283.

⁹⁸ *Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae Mediae Aetatis Illustrantia* (collegerunt et digesserunt Dr. Ludovicus de Thalloczy, Dr. Konstantin Jireček et Dr. Emilianus de Sufflay), vol. II, (Annos 1344-1406 Tabulamque geographician continens), Vindobonae MCMXIII, ribotim, Tiranë, Prishtinë: "Dukagjini"-Pejë, 2002, document 699 [hereafter *Acta Albaniae* II]; DHS 1, doc. 231, 234.

After the death of the despot Ezau in 1411, Evdokia Balsha tried to govern Ioannina by herself. She opposed the efforts of a good part of the city-peers that wanted to surrender the city of Ioannina to the nephew of the despot Ezau, Count of Kefalonia, Karl Toko.⁹⁹ Mainly supported by the lower and middle strata of the city, “Albania’s Despina” started negotiations with Gjon Zenebishi, a choice that put in movement the supporters of Karl Toko.¹⁰⁰ After a complot organized by them, despina Evdokia together with her sons was forced to abandon the city and temporarily take shelter at Gjon Zenebishi in Gjirokastra.¹⁰¹

“On 1427 –as P. Xhufi evidences– Evdokia and her two sons are ascertained in Ragusa. ‘Albania’s Despina’ was now nearly 60 years old and her presence in Ragusa seems that caused inconveniences on the city authorities: Evdokia pretended properties from the possessions of the Balsha family, on which existed a strong clash between Venice and Serbia with which Ragusa had problematic relations.”¹⁰² For this reason, the Ragusan government showed interest in Evdokia Balsha and her sons moving away from Ragusa and being carefully watched and protected.¹⁰³ A year later (1428) the Great Council of Ragusa approved to grant Evdokia the permission to settle in the city of Modon¹⁰⁴ (Methoni), in the southwest of Peloponnese.

Helena Topia (1388-1402/03), daughter of Charles Topia (1359-88),¹⁰⁵ heir of a part of Topia principality after her father’s death, became the ruler of Kruja and the surrounding regions together with her husband, the Venetian noble March Barbadico.¹⁰⁶ With the agreement

⁹⁹ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 286.

¹⁰⁰ *Op.cit.*, vol. I, 286.

¹⁰¹ *Op.cit.*, vol. I, 286.

¹⁰² Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 326.

¹⁰³ Xhufi, *op.cit.*, 326.

¹⁰⁴ Jireček, “Witwe und die Söhne,” 16.

¹⁰⁵ The other daughter of Charles Topia was also Vojsava or Vojslava dead on 1394, which was married with Progon Dukagjini (son of Lekë I Dukagjini) and after with a Venetian noble “Kyr Izakun, Kursaka, as is said, with the head of the patrician Venetian families, Engjëll.” Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 134; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 311.

¹⁰⁶ Ludwig von Thallóczy–Konstantin Jireček, “Zwei Urkunden aus Nordalbanien,” in *Illyrisch–Albanische Forschungen*, ed. Dr. Ludwig von Thallóczy. (München und Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1916). This was used after the translation

of August 28, 1393, Venice succeeded to convince Helena Topia and March Barbadico to continue ruling Kruja on behalf of the Seignior and as its vassals.¹⁰⁷ A year later (1394), the consorts Topia and Barbadico pledged alliance with the Ottomans and became vassals of the sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402), an act that caused the Venetians' dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁸ The husband of Helena Topia, under the Ottomans' approval, tried to occupy all the territories to the outskirts of Durrës and also encourage the local population in rebellion against the Venetian authorities.¹⁰⁹ In these conditions, on September 6, 1394, the Republic of San Marco decided to organize the occupation of Kruja and arrest the rebel Barbadico and his wife Helena Topia, who according to the Venetians inspired her husband in his political stances.¹¹⁰

Referring to Milan Šufflay, on February 14, 1395, Constantinus Balsha (the son of George I Balsha and Teodora Dejanović), the second husband of Helena Topia, "had taken over Kruja as a Turk vassal. Constantinus Balsha who married with Helena Topia had Kruja in possession. He became ruler of the entire region of Skuria near Durrës and on 1401 became honorary citizen of Venice together with his wife and children.¹¹¹ But, he didn't give up his old plans to conquer Durrës even with the help of the Ottomans. Later he met a tragical end, being sent to Venice with his wife, after his mother Theodora was sentenced to death on October 22nd 1402."¹¹² On October 22, 1402, the Venetian authorities proclaimed Helena Topia innocent and also decided to give back the previously confiscated properties.¹¹³ The year 1403 would mark the end

in Albanian by Mustafa Merlika-Kruja: Ludwig von Thallóczy–Konstantin Jireček, "Kruja e qarku i saj bërthamë e Shqipnis Mesjetore" (Kruja and its core region of Medieval Albanian), in *Vëzhgime iliro-shqiptare*, ed. Dr. Ludwig Von Thallóczy (Shkodër: Camaj-Pipa, 2004), 72; Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 134; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 291.

¹⁰⁷ Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt*, 316.

¹⁰⁸ Thallóczy–Jireček, "Kruja e qarku i saj bërthamë e Shqipnis Mesjetore," 72.

¹⁰⁹ *Acta Albaniae* II, doc. 518, 522; Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 134.

¹¹⁰ *Acta Albaniae* II, doc. 524, 525; DHS 1, doc. 168, 169; Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 134.

¹¹¹ About this issue see also DHS 1, doc. 125.

¹¹² Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 135; For more see Thallóczy–Jireček, "Kruja e qarku i saj bërthamë e Shqipnis Mesjetore," 73.

¹¹³ DHS 1, doc. 267; Šufflay, *Serbët e Shqiptarët*, 134.

of the political activity of the noble Topia family, when the Count Niketë Topia took the castle of Kruja from the hands of his cousin, Helena.¹¹⁴

A special brunt in the political activity of Zaharia family had Boksa Dukagjini (daughter of Lekë I Dukagjini), wife of Kojë Zaharia, ruler of the castle of Shas and then of Deja and the straits of the road along the Drin river. The Dukagjini and Zaharia families, which shared common boundaries and often had marriage alliances among them, had in general close relations.¹¹⁵ After the death of Lekë Zaharia (son of Kojë Zaharia and Boksa Dukagjini) in 1444, his grandmother Boksa Dukagjini became head of the family because her son Koja II was still an infant: she sought the Venetian support by giving up Deja and Shas to the Republic of San Marco, while the other territories of the Zaharia family were handed over to the Dukagjini family.¹¹⁶

A leading figure in the political life has also been the most important woman of the medieval Albania, Andronika Komnena (the elder daughter of Arianit Komneni or Gjergj Arianiti and Marie Muzaka) as it is mentioned in Gjon Muzaka's *Memorandum*,¹¹⁷ who is widely known with the name Donika Kastrioti, wife of George Kastrioti-Scanderbeg (married him in April 1451).¹¹⁸ In the work of the prominent Albanian historian and humanist Marin Barleti, *Historia e jetës dhe e bëmave të Skënderbeut*, published in Rome during 1508-10, the leading role and importance of Donika Kastrioti in ruling Scanderbeg's state is mentioned, at a time when he was leading nearly 3,000 warriors who landed in August 1461 in the city of Barletta in southern Italy to aid the King

¹¹⁴ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 291.

¹¹⁵ *Op.cit.*, vol. I, 312.

¹¹⁶ *Op.cit.*

¹¹⁷ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 418-9, 432.

¹¹⁸ Marinus Barletius, *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarvm principis* (Roma: Bernardinus Venetus de Vitalibus, 1508-1510). This was used after the translation from the original by Stefan J. Prifti: Marin Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut* (A History of Skanderbeg) (Tirana: Tirana University Press, Institute of History and Linguistics, 1964), 291; Kristo Frashëri, *Skënderbeu: jeta dhe vepra* (Skanderbeg: Life and Work) (Tirana: Toena, 2002), 181; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 416; Kasëm Biçoku, *Skënderbeu* (Skanderbeg) (Tirana: Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 2005), 127, 149-50.

Ferrante I of Naples (June 27, 1458-January 25, 1494), who was encircled along with a part of his army:¹¹⁹ “With an army composed by the prime of youth and powerful, he quickly arrived in Dauni; but, before leaving his kingdom, he carefully and with wisdom agreed with Mehmet II, the ruler of the Turks and signed an armistice with him for a year. There is no doubt that he [Scanderbeg] fixed the agreement as he wanted to, and all the other questions of his power the lead and the defense left at the hands of his wife and to some friends peer to him.”¹²⁰

Donika enjoyed political privileges even after Scanderbeg’s death on January 17, 1468. Referring to one of the most interesting Italian scholars on the medieval Albania of the last decades of the 20th century, Paolo Petta (1942-99), “Donika hasten to write on 24 February 1468 to king of Naples, Ferrante I, to inform him on her husband’s death: and in that occasion the king immediately replied to her that Scanderbeg was to him like a second father and his death was not less hard than that of my honorable father, king Alfonso.”¹²¹ At the same day, – P. Petta continues– King Ferrante I wrote to the faithful noble, Jeronimo Caravigno, and ordered him to meet Donika and her son and to ascertain that in case they would settle in his kingdom “they would have by myself all the attention and honors that every son is obliged to do to his mother and every father’s son” and that they would enjoy their feuds and other benefits if necessary.¹²²

Since King Ferrante I immediately offered them his protection and the possibility to enjoy the revenues from their possessions in Monte Sant’ Angelo and San Giovanni Rotondo (where Donika had previously

¹¹⁹ Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, book 9, 353-417; Frashëri, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, 379-80; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 442-3; Biçoku, *Skënderbeu*, 179-80: As a sign of gratitude for this help, the king of Naples donated to Scanderbeg the feuds of Monte Sant’ Angelo and of San Giovanni Rotondo and an annual pension of 1,200 ducats.

¹²⁰ Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, 392-3.

¹²¹ Paolo Petta, *Despotë të Epirit e princër të Maqedonisë: mërgata shqiptare në Italinë e periudhës së Rilindjes* (Despots of Epirus and Prince of Macedonia: Albanian Diaspora in Renaissance Italy) (Tirana: Edition IDK, 2001), 32.

¹²² Petta, *op.cit.*, 32.

stayed), she and her son decided to settle in Naples and not in the Republic of San Marco.¹²³ In these harsh historic conditions of serious political turmoil of the Albanian territories, most of which were occupied by the Ottomans, Donika together with her 13-year-old son Gjon, escorted by a retinue, which after the narrations of the chronicler Gjon Muzaka was generally composed of women, widows and daughters of the Albanian noble families (among whom there were the two sisters of the chronicler themselves) that had lost their fathers in the war, were included in the big Albanian exodus towards southern Italy.¹²⁴ Donika Kastrioti lived the biggest part of her life in the Aragon court of Naples, where she enjoyed growing authority and privileges¹²⁵ and the support and friendship of the queen Juana (Giovanna) of Aragon (1476-94), second wife of Ferrante I.¹²⁶ The fate of other Albanian noble women who emigrated in the Kingdom of Naples was not so bitter; thanks to the above-mentioned queen, who had contributed in their dowry, they were accepted in the bosom of the royal aristocracy, shining in the mundane Neapolitan society.¹²⁷

During the second half of the 15th century, Albania's women played a considerable role for the protection of their cities from the Ottoman attacks and sieges. In Barleti's first work entitled *Rrethimi i Shkodrës* (De obsidione Scodrensi), published in Latin in Venice on January 10, 1504, the courage, heroism, and contribution of the Shkodran women to the protection of their city during the second siege (second half of the 1478-beginning of 1479) are being described: "The enemy flags a thousand times were raised on the top of the moats; were held body to body

¹²³ Petta, *op.cit.*, 32; Biçoku, *Skënderbeu*, 202: The Senate of Venice decided to send in Albania Pal Engjëlli, who for many years was staying there as Scanderbeg's representative. Just after arriving to Albania, Pal Engjëlli talked with Scanderbeg's wife and son and with relatives of Kastrioti family, and asked them to give Kruja to Venice along the other possessions. When Scanderbeg's wife and son left Albania, Kruja passed at the hands of Venetians.

¹²⁴ *Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka*, 419-20.

¹²⁵ DHS 1479-1506, Part I, doc. 147: 18 August 1489—The King of Sicily decides that to Donika Kastrioti to be sent an Albanian boy called Kolë.

¹²⁶ DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 180: 18 January 1501—From the diaries of the Venetian Marino Sanudo (1466-1536). Scanderbeg's widow, Donika, is the companion of Naples' queen.

¹²⁷ Petta, *op.cit.*, 137.

fighting even in the heart of the city; no citizen of any age-group escaped without being wounded. Even the girls and the women were not second to the men for courage; watching the son dying at the mother's presence, the husband at the wife's presence dying, the brother laid close to the sister and again their eyes were not there, but always preparing to the strongest warriors the weapons against the enemy, carried every work that were told to do, replaced in many works the warriors, that were resting a little bit or tied their wounds. Nor the cannon, or the weapon or the death frightened them; all were committed to one purpose: to save the city by even shedding the last drop of blood."¹²⁸

After the fall of Drisht (September 1, 1478)¹²⁹ and Shkodra together with its surroundings at the hands of the Ottomans (April 25, 1479),¹³⁰ pensions,¹³¹ provisions,¹³² privileges,¹³³ and the right of asylum¹³⁴ in Venice and Friuli¹³⁵ were granted by the Venetian authorities for the widows and girls of Drisht and Shkodra, whose husbands and family members lost their lives in the war.¹³⁶ The Venetian Seigniori didn't give help and support only to the widows of the commanders or other high military leaders of the army¹³⁷ and of the representatives of the

¹²⁸ Marinus Barletius, *De obsidione Scodrensi* (Venetiis: Bernardinus Venetus de Vitalibus, 1504-1505). This was used after the translation from the original by Henrik Lacaq: Marin Barleti, *Rrethimi i Shkodrës* (The Siege of Shkodra) (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1982³), 154; Marin Barleti, *Rrethimi i Shkodrës* (The Siege of Shkodra) (Tirana: Onufri, 2012), 206-7.

¹²⁹ Lucia Nadin, *Shqiptarët në Venedik: mërgim e integrim 1479-1552* (Albanians in Venice: Exile and Integration 1479-1552) (Tirana: "55," 2008), 162.

¹³⁰ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. I, 471.

¹³¹ DHS 1479-1506, Part I, doc. 24, 25, 60, 62, 146, 188.

¹³² DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 43, 46.

¹³³ DHS 1479-1499, Part I, doc. 57; DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 33.

¹³⁴ DHS 1479-1499, Part I, doc. 11, 12, 35; DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 26.

¹³⁵ DHS 1479-1499, Part I, doc. 30, 31; DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 24, 25.

¹³⁶ See also Lucia Nadin Bassani, *Migrazione e integrazione: il caso degli Albanesi a Venezia (1479-1552)* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2008); Edmond Malaj, *Historia dhe fizionomia e një qyteti mesjetar shqiptar: Drishti* (History and Physiognomy of an Albanian Middle-Age City) (Tirana: Center for Albanological Studies, Institute of History, 2015), 278-80.

¹³⁷ DHS 1479-1499, Part I, doc. 35, 57, 62; DHS 1499-1506, Part II, doc. 26, 33.

local nobility, but also for eighty families from Shkodra belonging to the middle and lower ranks.¹³⁸

Conclusion

The presentation, the analysis, and the description of the above-mentioned facts explicitly proves that the general panorama of a noble citizen woman's position in 14th-15th centuries' Albania, as regards to the rights, privileges, social-political attributions etc., is similar to the medieval models and practices of the Italian-Dalmatian space and that of the Adriatic and the western Mediterranean realm as a whole.

¹³⁸ DHS 1479-1499, Part I, doc. 29.