

THE BYZANTINE CODICES: BERATINUS-1 & BERATINUS-2, TWO CULTURAL TREASURES FROM THE CITY OF BERAT. FROM THE BEGINNING – TODAY ON THE LIST OF “MÉMOIRE DU MONDE”, UNESCO (PART II)

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ABSTRACT

This part is a continuation of the 1st Part of the paper. *Part V*: comparison between the two Albanian Codices with the internationally known codices, and the Albanian noble families during the Middle Age. *Part VI*: are treated in detail the sacrifices for their preservation and protection from different foreign invaders. A short Epilogue as *Part VII*: something for the restoration process and UNESCO program.

Keywords: codex, Berat, Paleo-Christianity, heritage, culture, parchment.

V. Codices: *The survival in the Course of Time and History*

Given that they are a rare work as evidenced from the documents, codices were kept away from the people, being presented in front of believers as a liturgy usage, only once a year: January 27th¹), the memorial day of St. John Chrysostom (349 – 407). It was this rare exposure a fact that codices in this way would not grab the attention of malicious people. It is not known how the manuscripts arrived until 11th century but is understood that in the subsequent centuries, values of a heritage were recognized to them, therefore; there were attempts to steal them several times. Below, we are presenting a summary on the documented dangers, chronologically speaking:

The first danger documented for the acquisition of the codices derives from the Frank soldiers of Champagne region, who requested “to have them handed in for security reasons”. Their settlement in Albania belongs to the period of the establishment of the rule of Norman headman Robert Guiscard (1081), whose memory is kept even in *Chanson de Roland*.

¹) The translation date of the relics of the Saint from Comana (Cappadocia) to Constantinople.

Year 1271. The army of Charles I d'Anjou passed across Albania. The clerics and the believers were obliged to move the codices away from the Theologos Monastery in order to hide them out of the city.

Year 1356 brings about one of most horrible dangers, documented as a scriptmargin in the 27th Codex of Berat, as follows:

When the Serbians entered in Berat and jumped up and down in the alleys outside the castle, I, Skouripekis, saved 27 books from the Theologos Monastery and the church of St. George, the best and the most selected ones. I kept them in my arms and shoulders and went 4 times back and forth from the place. If I hadn't intervened on the first day, nothing would have been found on the second day, because the Serbians... didn't even let in peace the dead people by getting them out of their tombs.

It is comprehensible that two of the 27 books are the codices that we have under review. The note has orthographical mistakes, representing the fact that the scholar Kosta Naço thinks that the writer of the note didn't have good knowledge of Greek and what is more, it couldn't have been his mother tongue. The event took place on July 6th, 1356 "6, 208". The scholars Pëllumb Xhufi and Shaban Sinani think that the surname written in the Hellenized form "Skouripekis" means the *Skura-o* noble family, which was very well-known during that period. Today as continuation: *Zguro*, a modern form.

It is the period when the Serbian armies of Tsar Stephen Uroš V, who was abandoned from the inhabitants due to the impossibility to protect himself, besieged the city of Berat. Great attention was given to the library of Theologos monastery and St. George church, where the greatest cultural treasure of the city was located.

In 1400, it is shortly described another danger from the academic Alex Buda. In his studies, he refers to two chronicle notes written in 1400 and 1410 in the 50th Codex: ... *the noble Theodore II Muzaka has taken measures to secure and save «from fear of Turks», the priceless and old manuscripts ... "4, 3".* Berat was in danger of invasion from Ottoman Empire, therefore Muzaka, ruler of one of the Arbanon regions, took under protection two manuscripts that were in Berat Orthodox Metropolitan²).

World War I. During this period, the codices were in danger of acquisition. In 1914 – '17, Vangjel Bojaxhi (a trader from the city of Berat) kept a diary where there are enough data related to the preservation of manuscripts during the years of war. According to this diary, on

²) It should be stressed that Berat was invaded by the Turks in 1417 and the Ottoman Empire proclaimed it a vilayet center in 1431 "1/1985; Berati, 83".

Sunday, April 17th, 1915 the Austro-Hungarian army besieged the church of St. George and the commander tried a lot to secure the manuscripts. The priests were threatened all the week. However, they declared that they had just only heard of codices, but no one had ever seen them and let alone knowing where they could be found "13/2002; 118 – 124". Finally, the Austrian commander was convinced that the gospels either were not in the church or were taken from the person in charge, who had been absent for a long time. This way, the priests were freed.

It should be emphasized that also during the period between the two Great Wars, the codices were generally kept secret and their exposure could have been episodic. This is understood by the report which is entitled: *Information of... Berat local museum addressed to the State Archive about the discovery of important materials* (compiled on December 30th, 1963) "14/2010, 360".

World War II. In reference to the above report, we observe that in 1942, the Fascist Italian Royal Army requested the finding of the codices (to receive as a war trophy) but without any success. However, the most dramatic danger took place in **1944** with Wehrmacht of Nazi Germany:

Führer introduced to the conquered Albania three requests: 1. The submission of monetary gold of the National Bank; 2. The list of Jews in Albania; 3. The submission of codices: *Beratinus-1 & Beratinus-2*, from Berat. However, only the first request was fulfilled, i.e. the Albanian gold that was kept as assurance condition in *Banca di Roma*. The second request: the Jews and many others that came and temporally sheltered in Albania survived without dangers due to the Albanian people and government. In accordance with the third request: the Nazi army besieged St. George church and declared that if the codices were not submitted, the priests would be executed. Facing this condition that dealt with life, the church council led a prayer in front of the icon of St. Mary regarding impunity for a false oath, that they had decided to undertake. Afterwards, the 6 priests of Berat Ecumenical Synod disguised near the altar and hid on underground pit the two codices. They declared, subsequently to the German army that they were ready to vow in front of St. Mary icon, that they didn't have knowledge for the manuscripts location. Nevertheless, the Germans didn't believe and they lined the aged priests in front of the Castle wall, and if they didn't want to speak, they would be murdered. There were coincidentally heard shootings and the Germans thought that was an attack, so they freed the churchmen, who then hid and survived for the other attacks that could have happened in the future³).

³) The description of events is documented in 1972 in the Central State Archive entitled: *History of Codices* "14/2010; 390, 407, 408, 475".

We should emphasize that only in 20th century from diaries and different chronicles, about 30 names are available: priests, monks, church wardens and other Christian believers, which put their life at risk in order to save these two manuscripts that today we have as a treasure for all mankind and an integral part of program *Mémoire du Monde*. Municipality of Berat issued some certificates in sign of appreciation and acknowledgment in 2009.

Atheist period in Albania (1944 – '90). The installment of a Communist government in Albania and with emphasized atheist viewpoints resulted in the fact that the codices remained hidden and the 6 old priests died without violating their secret oath. It was the continuous interest from the President of Albanian Academy of Sciences, Alex Buda in cooperation of the secret state police and other functionaries with liability from the city of Berat, who on August 12th, 1968 managed to find manuscripts in the secret pit near the altar after many years of search. The manuscripts were damaged by humidity. Furthermore, many internal papers were coated with mold because of the long time that they had been left in the darkness. On August 31st, 1968 they were taken in submission from the Central State Archive and the scholar Theofan Popa undertook the first evaluation referring to the study edition of Pierre Batiffol.



St. George Church photographed in 1940

Restoration. In 1970, on the basis of a bilateral agreement that the Republic of Albania reached with the Republic of China, the manuscripts were sent for restoration in the Institute of Archaeology, Beijing in 1971. In the end, each parchment paper restored was closed within two organic glass tablets for a better protection. The Chinese restorers worked for 8 months in attempting to reach the excellent performance that we have even to this day.

UNESCO Program: *Memoire du Monde* and its Consultative Committee, organized a meeting in the People's Republic of China (on June 21st, 2005). UNESCO declared the two

codices: a world treasure and included them on the list of the oldest church manuscripts⁴⁾ (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Certificate submitted by UNESCO

VI. City of Berat: a Short Story for the First Centuries of Christianity

Berat represents one of the cities that it has given to Albania two rare documents that are identified with its name: *Beratinus*. There is no other city in Albania that has given its name to a treasure of culture heritage as an identifying surname. Berat enriched as church metropolitan after the city of Bylis. Regarding documents, it was an Episcopal center since in 5th century A.D. *Hierarchia Catholica* mentions in its study the episcopates from this city as signatories in the acts of church councils. In this period of Byzantium, the city was called *Pulcheriopolis* (Πουλχεριόπολις), different from the antique period name, i.e. *Antipatre* (Αντιπάτρεια).

The British traveler William Martin Leake in 1835, considering the similarities between the antique Antipatre and Medieval Berat, described by the Roman historian Titus Livus (59 BC – 17 AD), “as the city that is located in a narrow gorge”, he unified as an urban dwelling that vary one after another "5; 33, 34". The scholar Neritan Ceka has hypothesized an etymological relation among the name of the Illyrian tribe of *Parthini* (Πάρθινοι) and their principal town **Parthos** (Πάρθος, from old Illyrian is *white* color) and the Medieval form **Belegradon** (from old Bulgarian, *white city*), entitled by the Bulgarian hordes when they invaded the city in the Middle Age, so the name derived in the current form, i.e. **Berat**.

The found objects in the Castle of Berat bear witness for the Paleo-Christian architecture there. As earlier elements from the Christian cult, there are presented some Paleo-Christian impost capitals and some mosaic fragments. These findings are dated in 5th – 6th century.

⁴⁾ See the *Chronological Table* (1st Part of paper).

There are in apse of St. Theodore's church two architectonic parts reused that belong to an earliest construction. One belongs to a pillar, over whose flat relief is engraved a cross. Moreover, in window of the Apse, there is a small immured pillar that is inverted along with the capital (Fig. 2). There is a capital in the St. Nicholas's church, which is an element of the Paleo-Christian architecture "8; 114, 115" (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. St. Theodore's Church: image from apse (left) and the reused Paleo-Christian elements (right)



Figure 3. St. Nicholas Church: Paleo-Christian capital

The period from Antiquity to Middle Age was quite difficult for the cities because they had a deep decline due to the causes of transitional processes and barbarian hordes in the 5th – 7th century. The Illyrian cities were abandoned and downgraded into simple Episcopal centers and with military administration. The city of Berat, despite the barbarian destructions, survived as a life continuity from an Illyrian, Arbanon and lastly Albanian city "12, 9" (Fig. 4).

We can say that Pulcheripolis could have been an Episcopal center because it's cited like a town from the Byzantine geographer Hierocles in his work *Synecdemus* (compiled 528 – 529). The city name **Bel(i)grad** (Белградъ) must have been assigned by the Old Bulgarians about year 865. This evidence derives from the finding of an inscription in Ballsh town (Baš

or Glavinitsa), in which is cited that Tsar Boris I (Борис I) of Bulgaria was baptized being converted into the Christian religion with name Michael (Михаил). Later, in 878, a Pope mentioned it by name Beogradon as an Episcopal headquarter. It should be emphasized the variation from the Medieval Beogradon into the modern form Berat, that we use today. From 855 – 1018, the city was under the Bulgarian invasion. During the schism of 1054, the church of Berat remained in association with Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople⁵). From the Late Antiquity (4th – 6th century) until nowadays, in Berat would be built many cult monuments, but only some fragments provide some evidences for the Paleo-Christian period. The tradition of the holy scriptures in Albania lasted 15 centuries, being one of the most stable and sustainable cultural traditions. This tradition continued even during the Post-Ottoman period and also with the invention of Gutenberg's press (1440) evidencing its powerful roots.

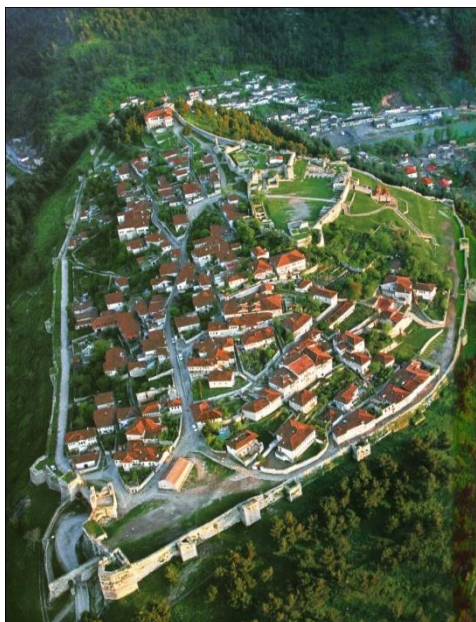


Figure 4. Aerial view of Berat castle

VII. EPILOGUE

It is already a well-known and accepted fact from all people that in the entirety of the historical-cultural evidences of Albania, an important place is occupied by codices: *Beratinus-1 & Beratinus-2*.

Codices of Albania possess a monumental treasure of culture and human thought. They represent one of the oldest variants of the New Covenant and are ranked on the list of the earliest codices of the world, the family: *purpureus aureus et argenta*, along with codices:

⁵) The church synod gathered under the leadership of Photios I (879 – 880), recognized the right of Patriarchate of Constantinople on the Illyrian church "10, 33".

Sinopensis O, Rossanensis, Petropolitanus, Vindobonensis and *Codex Greek 53*. Thus, out of seven rare codices, which have survived until now in the modern civilization, with uncial grapheme features and the writing in purple parchment, two representatives from that treasure of heritage are located in Albania.

Currently, there are 6000 church manuscripts preserved all over the world, but only three of them are archetypes and one of them is located in Albania: **Beratinus-1**. Such works, that are monuments of human thought history are arguments in favor of the cultural image of Albania and promote the cultural value of this country (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Left: Miniature of codexes included in the Albanian philately. Right: 10th Codex of Vlorë city (11th – 12th century): 236, Saint John is dictating the gospel to his disciple, Prochorus

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