

Edmond MALAJ*

THE CULT OF SAINT JOHN VLADIMIR AMONG THE ALBANIANS IN THE PRESENT DAYS

Abstract: St. John Vladimir is an important religious figure of Orthodox Spirituality. Today many religious Albanians both in Northern- and in Southern-Albania venerate him. Among them, there are not only Orthodox believers but also Catholics and Muslims. Many places and objects refer to the figure of St. John Vladimir, such as mountains (Oblika), monasteries, churches, and other objects.

It is important to mention here, especially, the *St. John Vladimir Monastery of Shijon* in Bradashes near the city of Elbasan (in Central Albania, a monastery with a monastic community for men belonging to the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania), and the remains of the *Church of the Most Pure Theotokos of Krajina*, (by Albanians known as “Zonja e Bekuar e Krajës”, and by Slavs popularly called *Prečista Krajinska*), which stood near Vladimir’s court, in Ostros of Kraja, a region in today Montenegro, where live Albanian people.

INTRODUCTION

Saint John Vladimir, known in Albania by the names *Shën Gjon Vladimiri* and *Shën Joan Vladimiri*,¹ lived between 10th and 11th century (c. 990–1016), and was the prince and the ruler of Zeta (in today Montenegro). “He left very few traces in medieval sources, and yet, for centuries now, he is present throughout the Balkans, notably in the areas of modern Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia”.²

He is an important religious figure of Orthodox Spirituality. Today many religious Albanians both in Northern- and in Southern-Albania venerate

* Edmond Malaj, Center of Albanian Studies

¹ Robert Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture*. London: Hurst & Company 2001, p. 139.

² Stefan Trajković Filipović, „Oh, Vladimir, King of Dioclea, Hard Headed, Heart Full of Pride!” Isaiah Berlin and Nineteenth Century Interpretations of the Live of Saint Vladimir of Dioclea.” in: *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology: Archaeology*. Vol 9, No 3 (2014), p. 760.



Fig. 1: Church of “Zonja e Bekuar e Krajës” alias *Prečista Krajinska*.

him. Among them, there are not only Orthodox believers, but also Catholics and Muslims.

Regarding the cult of St. John Vladimir in the North, it exists in the areas of Kraja in Montenegro. In Ostros is located St. Mary’s Church of Kraja, *Church of the Most Pure Theotokos of Krajina* (by Albanians known as “Zonja e Bekuar e Krajës”, and by Slavs popularly called *Prečista Krajinska*), which stood near Vladimir’s court³ and is considered as the first burial place of the saint.⁴

³ Constantin Jireček, “Skutari und sein Gebiet im Mittelalter”, nē: *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen*. Unter Mitwirkung von Professor Dr. Konstantin Jireček [e të tjerë]. Zusammengestellt von Dr. Ludwig von Thallóczy. I. Band. Mit einer Landkarte. München/Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot 1916, p. 95.

⁴ His life-history is very problematic. According to Stefan Trajković Filipović, “the first elaborated narrative about the saint, the *Life of Saint Vladimir of Dioclea*, was published in 1601 as part of the *Annals of the Priest of Dioclea* a chronicle depicting the history of an imagined early medieval Slavic dynasty and used as an introductory chapter to the *Kingdom of Slavs* by Mauro Orbini. The *Life* represents a developed hagiographic narrative with two main

He was taken prisoner by the Bulgarian Tsar Samuel but was restored to the throne after a love-affair with Kosara, who was the daughter of Tsar Samuel.⁵ The Doklean Presbiter tells this beautiful love-story as following:

“Cossara, was animated and inspired by a beatific soul. She approached her father and begged that she might go down with her maids and wash the head and feet of the chained captives. Her father granted her wish, so she descended and carried out her good work. Noticing Vladimir among the prisoners, she was struck by his handsome appearance, his humility, gentleness and modesty, and the fact that he was full of wisdom and knowledge of the lord. She stopped to talk to him, and to her his speech seemed sweeter than honey and [335] the honeycomb. Therefore, in no wise on account of lust, but rather profoundly affected by his youth and beauty, and since she heard that he was a king, the scion of royal blood, she desired him. Having bade him farewell, she was intent upon securing his release from bondage. She approached the emperor, threw herself at his feet and addressed him thus: “My Father, my lord, I know that you mean to present me with a husband, as is customary. Now, if it pleases your eminence, I would have you give me the king Vladimir whom you are holding in chains. You should know that I would rather die than accept another man”. The emperor was overjoyed when he heard this, and granted her request because he loved his daughter deeply, and knew that Vladimir was of royal lineage. Immediately he sent for Vladimir, and ordered that he be brought before him bathed and clothed in the manner of a king. Then, gazing fondly upon him, and kissing him in front of the nobles of his kingdom, he gave his daughter to him for his wife.”⁶

lessons — the value of (Saint Vladimir’s) martyrdom (following the model of Christ’s Passion) and of divine punishment awaiting the sinners. Furthermore, as part of the Annals of the Priest of Dioclea (and of the Kingdom of Slavs), the Life depicts Vladimir as a Slavic holy king.” Stefan Trajković Filipović, “Oh, Vladimir, King of Dioclea, Hard Headed, Heart Full of Pride!” Isaiah Berlin and Nineteenth Century Interpretations of the Life of Saint Vladimir of Dioclea.”, in: *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology: Archaeology*. Vol 9, No 3 (2014), p 760.

⁵ R. Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, ...*, p. 139.

⁶ The translation of the text si from Paul Stephenson, Professor of Byzantine History. Translated Excerpts from Byzantine Sources: The Imperial Centuries, c. 700–1204. “Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja (Ljetopis’ Popa Dukljanina), Chapter 36” URL: <http://www.paulstephenson.info/trans/lpd.2.html> (26. 9. 2016). See also the original Text in Latin: “Quadam itaque die imperatoris Samuelis filia Cossara nomine, conpuncta, et inspirata a Spiritu Sancto accessit ad patrem, et petivit ab eo, ut descenderet cum suis ancillis, et lavaret caput,

According to Doclean Presbyter, John Vladimir was killed by treason from Vladislaus the Bulgarian Emperor in Prespa,⁷ at the door of the Church.⁸ According to the legend, he came in Kraja holding his head in his hands, and he was buried in the Church of the Virgin of Kraja. Second the Presbyter Diokleas, the person, who brought the body of the Saint in Kraja was his wife, Cosara, with the permission of Vladislaus, who saw the miracles done through of the Saint.⁹

CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOPRIC OF KRAJA

Later, the Catholic Church signs this place as the Archbishopric of Kraja. As archbishop (*Archeipiscopus Crainensis*) is also known the Albanian prominent catholic priest Pal Dushmani (*Paulus Dussius* † 1457), who had been previously Bishop of Drivasto (*Episcopus Drivastensis*) and from the year 1455 figures as Catholic Bishop of Kraja¹⁰. We assume that this Albanian clergyman must

et pedes vinculatorum, et captivorum, quod ei a patre concessum est. Descendit itaque, et peregit bonum opus. Inter haec cernens Vladimirus, et videns quod esset pulcher in aspectu humilis, rnsuetus, atque modestus, et quod esset repletus sapientia, et prudentia Domini, morata locuta est cum illo, videbatur namque ei loquela illius dulcis super mel, et favum. Igitur non causa libidinis, sed quia condoluit iuventuti, et pulchritudini illius, et quoniam audiret eum esse regem, et ex regali prosapia ortum dilexit eum, et salutato eo recessit, volens post haec a vinculis liberare eum, accessit ad impertorem, et prostrata pedibus illius taliter locuta est: *Mi pater et domine, scio quia daturus es mihi virum sicuti moris est. Nunc ergo, si tuae placet magnitudini, aut des mihi virum Vladimirus regem, quem tenes in vinculis, aut scias me prius morituram, quam aliam accipium virum.* Imperator haec audiens quia valde diligebat filiam suam, et quia sciebat Vladimirus ex regali progenie ortum, laetus effectus est, annuit fieri petitionem illius, statimque mittens ad Vladimirus et balne... vestibisque indutum regiis iussit sibi praesentari; et benigne intuens atque osculans coram magnatibus regni sui, tradidit ei filiam suam in uxorem." Monumenta Montenegrina: Knjiga X: Dukljanski Prezviter. Kraljestvo Slovena. Pripremio i predgovor napisao Vojislav D. Nikčević. Preveo Mile Bogeski. Podgorica 2003, p. 97.

⁷ „Vladimir Rex, a Vladislao Bulgaro inuitatus ad Curiam, perfide decollatur." Monumenta Montenegrina: Knjiga X: Dukljanski Prezviter. Kraljestvo Slovena, p. 101.

⁸ Johann Georg von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien*. Nebst einer Karte andern artistischen Beilagen. Jena: Mauke 1854, p. 84.

⁹ *Videns autem, Imperator mirabilia quae ibi Deus operetur, poenitentia ductus, fati timuit; concessitque consobrinae suae tollere corpus eius, et sepelire honorifice, quocumque vellet et asportavit in loco, qui Craini dicitur, ubi curia eius fuit, et in ecclesia Sanctae Mariae recondidit.* Monumenta Montenegrina: Knjiga X: Dukljanski Prezviter. Kraljestvo Slovena, p. 102–103.

¹⁰ *Illyrici Sacri. Tomus Septimus, Ecclesia Diocletiana, Antibarensis, Dyrrhachiensis et Sirmiensis, cum eorum suffraganeis.* Auctore Daniele Farlato, Presbytero Societatis Jesu,

have played an important role for the Veneration of St. John Vladimir among the catholic Albanians.¹¹ Another person, who could have played an important role for it, is the famous Dominican cardinal from Ragusa Johann Stojković (†1443)¹², who was an important theologian of the first half of the 15th century, president of the Council of Basle, and a legate to Constantinople.¹³

THE PROCESSION ON RUMIJA

Here, among the Albanians of Kraja, takes place a procession, not as it was centuries before, but the believers get up early in the morning and climb the top of Rumiya about 1595 m above sea level.¹⁴ In this procession participate not only Catholics, but also Muslim Albanians from the territories of Kraja, Shestani, Tivari and Ulcinj.¹⁵

After climbing back from Rumiya, the participants arrive in the village Dobrec, and there takes place a concert with music and among the participants of procession is distributed free food and drinks. The procession takes place among the Slavic orthodox believers of Montenegro too, and the start of the procession is from the village Veljo Mikulij. Therefore, there are two parallel processions, one from the Albanians who use another way, and another from Slavs. The procession takes place every year on May 22, the day of Pentecost.¹⁶

et Jacobo Coletto olim ejusdem Societatis alumno. Venetiis, MDCCCXVII. Aput Sebastianum Coleti. Superiorem permissu ac privilegio. (Botim i dytë. Prishtinë: Arbi 2004.), p. 438.

¹¹ Milan von Šufflay, „Die Kirchenzustände im vortürkischen Albanien. Die orthodoxe Durchbruchszone im katholischen Damme“, nē: Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen. Unter Mitwirkung von Professor Dr. Konstantin Jireček, Professor Dr. Milan von Šufflay, Sektionschef Theodor Ippen, Professor E. C. Sedlmayr, Archivar Dr. Josef Ivanič, Weiland Emmerich von Karáson, K. Ung. Sektionsrat Béla Péch und Karl Thopia. Zusammengestellt von Dr. Ludwig von Thallóczy. I. Band. Mit einer Landkarte. München/Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot 1916, p. 224.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Known by the names *Ivan Stojković de Corvatia*, *Johannes Stoyci*, *John Stoicowic*, *Johannes de Ragusio*, *Jean de Raguse*, *Giovanni di Ragusa*. About his life and work see: Alois Krchnák, „Johannes von Ragusa, Stoyci (Stojković) de Ragusa“, in: Bautz, Traugott. *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*. Vol. 7. Herzberg: Bautz 1994, cols. 1256–1263.

¹⁴ Constantin Jireček, *Geschichte der Serben*. Erster Band (bis 1371). Gotha: A. F. Perthes 1911, p. 207. See also: M. Šufflay, „Die Kirchenzustände...“, in: *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen*, p. 223.

¹⁵ From the observations of the author of this article (Edmond Malaj), who took part in this procession in year 2014.

¹⁶ From the observations of the author of this article (Edmond Malaj), who took part in this procession in year 2014.



Fig. 2: Albanian Procession on Rumija.
Photo: Edmond Malaj 2014

Rumija, when the believers arrive there. Therefore, we can see so many stone brought there from the believers in many centuries.¹⁹ They have been used to build a basement for a small prefabricated metal church, brought in this place with the help of helicopters of the Army of Serbia and Montenegro.²⁰ This

Another important object of the procession is the cross, which is considered as the “Cross of St. John Vladimir” (alb. *Kryqi i Krajës*, monteneg. *Krajinski krst*)¹⁷. According to legend, a big white falcon threw this cross to the saint. This was a sign for the construction of the Church dedicated the Holy Virgin. According to the tradition, the cross was preserved in a village between Ulcinj and Bar¹⁸.

This was the cross of the Church, while there was another large one, held by believers while climbing the Mount of Rumija during the procession. Part of the procession is taking a stone and putting it on the top of

¹⁷ M. Šufflay, „Die Kirchengestände...”, in: *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen*, p. 223.

¹⁸ Milan Shuflaj, *Serbët dhe shqiptarët*. Përktheu nga Kroatishtja: Prof. dr. Hasan Çipuri. Tiranë: Toena 2004, p. 128.

¹⁹ From the observations of the author of this article (Edmond Malaj), who took part in this procession in year 2014.

²⁰ Patrick Moore, “Serbia and Montenegro: The Politics Of Churches And Helicopters (August 05, 2005)”. URL: <http://www.rferl.org/a/1060426.html> (10. 11. 2016)



Fig. 3: Feast at the village Dobrec, after the procession on Rumija.
Photo: Edmond Malaj

church was consecrated from the Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC).²¹ This brought reactions in the political camp of Montenegro.

MOUNT OBLIKA IN SHKODRA

Another place that reminds to this saint is also the Mount Oblika in the west of Shkodra, five-six kilometers from this city. According to legend about Saint John Vladimir created in the first half of the 11th century, there were on this mountain many snakes, which as result of the devout prayers by the Serbian prince became harmless.²² These snakes were just terrific, both for the Albanians and for the Slavs. According to another legend, the Mountain Oblika was filled with poisonous snakes, which caused death to the residents and to

²¹ Ibid.

²² C. Jireček, *Geschichte der Serben.*, p. 167.

their livestock and so Saint John Vladimir, who at that moment was there with his army, prayed to God, and so the local residents were saved.²³

THE CULT OF ST. JOHN VLADIMIR IN DURRËS

The cult of St. John Vladimir existed in Durrës (Middle Albania) too, where previously there were the relics of the saint.²⁴ The relics were taken from Kraja in 1215 by Theodor Angel Komneni and settled in a church of this city²⁵, which even today remains an enigma. Here the believers of both Churches, the western and eastern one, honored the relics of the saint. Reverence was on May 22, and during this time great fairs were organized in this city. In the Greek *Offices* St. John Vladimir was venerated as the Patron of Dyrrhachion (Durrës).²⁶

THE CULT OF ST. JOHN VLADIMIR IN ELBASAN (THE MONASTERY OF ST. JOHN)

Later, the relics were taken away by Prince Karl Topia and settled in Elbasan, exactly in Shijon near the city of Elbasan, where is the Monastery of St. John Vladimir, built by the Topia 1381 in veneration of the saint.²⁷ The question arises: why was built the monastery precisely in that country? According to legend, a white falcon appeared there to St. John Vladimir, as he was hunting.²⁸ The saint initially built a small chapel in this country where he prayed

²³ *Erant praeterea per montem Obliquum igniti serpentes, qui statim ut aliquos percutiebant, absque ulla tarditate moriebantur, coeperuntque magnum damnum facere tam de hominibus, quam de animalibus. Tunc rex Vladimirus orationem fudit ad dominum cum lacrimis, ut Deus omnipotens Hberaret populum suum ab illa pestifera morte. Exaudivit Deus orationem famuli sui et ab illo die nullus ex eis percussus est, sed et usque hodie si homo, aut aliqua bestia in monte illo a serpente percussus fuerit, sanus et absque ulla laesione perseverat. Fueruntque in illo monte ab illo die quo oravit beatus Vladimirus quasi sine veneno serpentes usque in hodiernum diem.* Monumenta Montenegrina: Knjiga X: Dukljanski Prezviter. Krajelstvo Slovena, p. 102–103.

²⁴ K. Jireček, „Skutari”, në: *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen I*, p. 96.

²⁵ Robert Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion ...*, p. 139.

²⁶ M. Šufflay, “Die Kirchenzustände...”, in: *Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen*, p. 222.

²⁷ Theofan Popa, *Mbishkrime të kishave Të Shqipëri*, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave (Instituti i Historisë) 1998, p. 50–51. See also: Theofan Popa, *Piktorët mesjetarë Shqiptarë*. Tiranë: Ministria e Arësimit dhe Kulturës 1961, p. 9.

²⁸ J. von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien...*, p. 83.

seven times a day²⁹, according to some traditions, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, according to some others, the Holy Trinity.³⁰

An earthquake destroyed this church, and it is unknown for how long this church has existed.³¹ According to another legend, this was the first burial place of saint.³² Then, after he was beheaded, he came there, holding his own head in his hand, and was buried there in the XI century. So what we find in the legend of Kraja, is pretended in the legend of Bradashesh, too, but in a different version.

The new church of the monastery was much bigger than the other, that had existed before. The monastery, which was built by a Catholic prince, in a predominantly Orthodox country, but not too far away there were Catholic and Uniate (Catholic Byzantine) believers, became an important center of worship, and developed and got even greater significance after the fall of Voskopoja (*Moschopolis*) in the second half of the 18th century, when many scholars from Voskopoja came to find refuge in this monastery.³³ Procopius, Mitropolit of Durres, built today's church in the early 20th century under the care of Epitrop Spiridhon Xhufka (March 1901).³⁴ The saint is venerated today in this country, and in his Veneration participate thousands of believers from all over the country.

Litany proceeds by coming three times around the church of the Monastery. Then they open the ark, where the relics are held, and the cotton is changed. The remains of the saint are located on this cotton. This happens once a year, on 4 and 5 June, during the feast and procession of the relics.

The monks insert the old cotton in small plastic bags and distribute it to the believers and newcomers in the procession, in order to protect them from diseases, the evil eye and disasters, and to donate them prosperity and luckiness. One of the boxes with the relics of the saint has existed in the city neighborhood "Kala" of Elbasan at the Church of Saint Mary, today this rectangular box is kept in the National Museum of Albania.³⁵ This object belongs to the Eastern Church and is a piece of Post Byzantine art with strong Baroque influence.³⁶

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ According to Father Irene Gega, interviewed by Edmond Malaj, June 2016.

³¹ J. von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien...*, p. 83.

³² According to Father Irene Gega, interviewed by Edmond Malaj, June 2016.

³³ Melsi Labi, *Gjon Vladimiri, princi që u bë shenjt (Sipas burimeve arkivore)*. Tiranë: Muzeu Historik Kombëtar 2015, p. 53.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 26.

³⁵ Melsi Labi, "Zbulimi i relikeve të Gjon Vladimirit në Muzeumin Historik Kombëtar", in: *Studime Muzeologjike* nr. 5. (Tiranë 2015), p. 5.

³⁶ Erilda Selaj, "Ndërhyrjet konservuese në kutinë e lipsaneve të Shën Gjon Vladimirit", in: *Studime Muzeologjike* nr. 5. (Tiranë 2015), p. 79.



Fig. 4: An Old woman preying in the Church of Saint John Vladimir. Elbasa. Photo: Edmond Malaj, June 2016



Fig. 5: The Procession of the relics. Tirana Observer 01/06/2016

A part of the Cult was also the fair, which was prohibited since 1964, ostensibly to prevent brucellosis. But in fact, the fair was prohibited from the authorities of the communist dictatorship.³⁷

According to Father Irene Gega, one of the monks of the Monastery, the relics sometimes become heavy like lead, and the men who carry the relics around the church can barely hold the arc.³⁸ Sometimes the relics are very light and there is no strain to carry them. According to legend, 16 Franks tried to steal these relics and they loaded them on a mule, but the mule died immediately due to the weight of the relics. They threw the ark away in the water of Shkumbini-river and the heavy arc went not down but swam through Shkumbini and Kushe-River and came to the monastery.³⁹

³⁷ Melsi Labi, *Gjon Vladimiri...*, p. 64.

³⁸ According to Father Irene Gega, interviewed by Edmond Malaj, June 2016.

³⁹ J. von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien...*, p. 83.

CONCLUSION

St. John Vladimir venerate in the present days, not only Orthodox Christians but also Muslims, who live in the surrounding regions of Elbasan. Albanian Orthodox believers come to the monastery from all over Albania, and pray and seek help for their problems. There are often believers, too, who come from outside to venerate the saint. During the celebration of the feast, we see especially believers from Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, but also from other countries such as Russia and Ukraine. During the feast, after Mass, a lunch is organized, too, in the area of the monastery, attended by various believers.

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