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# The Islamization Process of the Albanian Population in Kosovo and Macedonia

(According to the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Registers)

Iljas Rexha

A huge number of articles and studies have been compiled by different national and international authors with different points of view concerning the Islamization of the Balkan population during the 500 year Ottoman period. Most of these articles have a subjective and tendentious content and very few are of a real and objective nature.

The Slavic and Greek population belonging to the Orthodox religion were not Islamized, apart from isolated cases of individuals and small groups, since they had their own national churches which, under Ottoman rule, were protected by the Sultan's *fermans* and Ottoman law.

These Ottoman provisions ensured that the population of these nations would not be Slavized while two other indigenous populations of the Balkans, the Albanians and the Bosnians accepted Islam in various ways, since even before the Ottoman penetration they were left without their churches which, during the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries were occupied while the non-slav population was being punished by harsh measures. In many cases they were even persecuted as heretics by the Slavic rulers who tried to convert the population to the Orthodox religion of the pravoslav rite by force.

Prior to the Slavic penetration in the Balkans, most of the Albanian population belonged to the orthodox religion of the Greco-Byzantine rite, as they had lived under Byzantine rule for about eight centuries and only a small number professed the Catholic religion of the Romano-Latin rite under the Vatican and the rule of Venice. There were also small groups belonging to the religious movement of Bogumilizm which was followed by the two above-mentioned churches and which, by the time the Ottomans entered Macedonia, had embraced Islam as a result of education and the preaching of *ahi dervishes* from Anatolia.

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There were centuries of rivalry between the Orthodox church of the East and the Catholic church of the West for domination in the territories mostly populated by Albanians. In addition to other political, social, economic and psychological factors, the main factor was the antagonism between the Eastern and Western churches, which led to the Albanians' acceptance of Islam.

Ottoman cadastral records show that the majority of the Albanian population who lived in the present day regions of Kosovo and Macedonia, were forcibly converted to the Orthodox religion of the pravoslav rite by the Slavic administration during medieval Slavic rule.

It is therefore an undeniable historical fact that Ottoman penetration in the Balkans and the establishment of an Ottoman administration interrupted the process of the Slavization of the Albanian population who, in the Middle Ages, lived in the provinces of Kosovo and Macedonia, and of the Hellenization of the population in the south of medieval Albania.

By the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Ottoman penetration into the Balkans confronted the Albanian population with total disintegration into the ethno-cultural, religious and territorial divisions which had existed for 1,500 years under Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Bulgarian and finally Slavo-Serbian rule.

In this period and under these circumstances, the Albanians were forced to be educated and administered in foreign languages such as Greek, Latin or Slavic, depending on whose rule they were under. Although some Albanian princes and noblemen (1043-1050) had achieved independence from Byzantium in only one part of central Albania and upper Prizren, its other parts that were mainly populated by Albanians. The area from Prizren to Nis in the north and to Veles and Stip in the southeast remained under Slavo-Bulgarian and later Slavo-Serbian rule. After the death of the Serbian King Stefan Dusan (1355), the medieval Serbian state, which had earlier ruled over Kosovo and Macedonia, territories populated mainly by Christian Albanians, was routed as some princes and noblemen with not only Serbian origin (including Albanians) established independent rule.

The Albanian princes of Balshaj succeeded in extending their administration in Northern Albania, Montenegro and the western part of Kosovo, while the nobles of the Albanian principalities of Gropaj and Muzkaaj also

extended their political and administrative power in the western part of Macedonia and on the outskirts of Ohrid and the Polog valley of Tetova. The Serbian prince Lazar Hrebelanović ruled over the Nis and Toplica provinces, which were also populated by Albanians with a centre in Krusevac, while the Serbian nobleman Vuk Branković still ruled the largest part of Kosovo northeast to Kursumli and northwest to Yeni Pazar. Parts of eastern Macedonia and the area surrounding Prilep were ruled by the Serbian nobles Ugleša, Vukasin and the brothers Dejanovic, who later became vassals of Sultan Murat. After the battle of Maritsa in 1371 and that of Kosovo, the Ottoman army managed to occupy the principalities of the Balkan states and establish its own administration based on Islamic principles. At the same time, the Ottoman state was fully engaged in disseminating the Islamic faith among the Christian Balkan population in order to make them their own faithful allies and encourage them to engage in wars against other European countries through state institutions, the timar system, the ghulam system, the *içoglan* system and through various religious institutions.

As we stated above, the Ottoman register records show that the majority of the Albanian population of Kosovo and western Macedonia who bore names of the Slavic and Greek-Byzantine onomastic sphere were of the Orthodox faith, but the part bearing the anthroponymy and pathronymy of the Roman-Latin sphere belonged to the Catholic faith.

During the medieval period, the Albanian population, which was under the constant pressure of the Slav-Serbian royal administration was subject to religious conversion. Evidence for the Albanians' conversion is to be seen in the Slavic church administration documents of the 13th-14th centuries and in the early registrations of the Ottoman administration of the 15th century in which the children of Albanians were given typically Slavic names whereas their parents kept their traditional surnames as: Bozhidar Berisha, Bogdan Muzaka, Radislav Mazreka, Vukashin Arbanas, Vulk Arnaut, Novak Arnaut, Bogoslav Gjoni, Radonja Gjini, Bogdan Tanushi, Radoslav Leshi, Rajko Ljulji, Vlado Progoni etc.

As mentioned above, the Albanian anthroponymia and pathronymia underwent great changes during Slavic medieval rule, when the Albanian population was given typically Slavic names by the Orthodox church in the absence of the Catholic church of the state of Raska, especially during the

rule of Kings called Milutin and Dusan. These facts were demonstrated and documented 25 years ago by Gasper Gjini based on the original documents of the Vatican Archives. It can be seen that the Pope of Rome addressed the kings of Raska by asking them that the Catholic churches be released and placed at the service of the Catholic population. This was done for political purposes in order to eliminate the heritage of the material monuments of the indigenous Albanian population. This is concerned with the false and fabricated thesis of Serbian historiography that when they allegedly invaded Kosovo it was a vacuum uninhabited by any other population. However, the recent discovery of archeological, epigraphic, toponomastic, historical and medieval archival material testified to the fact that the Ilirian-Dardan tribes (whose descendants are the present day Albanians) had lived in Kosovo and Macedonia.

In such a historical period, when the process of Slavization of the Albanian population of Northern Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia had intensified, the penetration by the Ottoman-Turks can be said to have stopped this process by depriving the ruling Serbian political class of territories mainly populated by Albanians.

With the establishment of the Ottoman administration in Albanian lands a more advanced structure system of Ottoman society had begun. This was a military timar system which enabled the lower Christian society strata to advance and become integrated in Ottoman society and to enter all administrative services.

The Ottoman sipahis that formed part of the Ottoman army structure came from different provinces and ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire. The largest part of the cavalry that served the Sultan and the Ottoman government during the wars came from the timar system. The role of this system can be seen from an analysis of the timar and its administrative, financial and military functions.

Sipahis had the right to use the timar for a definite time as the land was state property, and in cases of non-performance of the obligations to the state that right was taken away. They enjoyed this right as feu (property) or as revenue, and in exchange they offered the state service of a military character. In this way, the timar retained the salary the state officials and militaries gained in return for their continuous military service and will-

ingness to fight without any financial trouble to the state. As this Ottoman social system had its foundations in Islamic principles and Sharia law their principle was: no individual can be forcibly converted or reconverted into another religion. There are many Ottoman Sultanic decrees and fermans on this issue which forbid the conversion by force.<sup>27</sup> There were cases of local government officials abusing their positions and applying violence towards Christians and imposing higher illegal taxes, but those people were penalized by the Sublime Porte. There was only one case when Sultan Selim proposed the forcible conversion of Christians, a proposal which was not approved as it was in contravention of the Koran, the Holy book; his proposal was therefore not approved by the Shaikh al Islam and the Council of Ministers. Therefore, through the Ottoman timar military system, the policy of the central Ottoman government was one of indulgence and toleration, choosing other more attractive methods and forms as to how the individuals and members of the Christian faith might profit and become integrated in to Ottoman society. In this way they would be of service to a system that favoured the Islamic faithful by giving them high administrative positions and functions, especially those involving the Ottoman military timar system, which also allowed Christians to possess a small property if they had satisfied all the set requirements to the state. Thus the Ottoman administration used mitigating methods of economic benefits for those Christians who converted to Islam, whereas for those who refused this process there was no exemption from various types of taxes. A condition for the right to acquire higher state positions and to get other privileges in Ottoman society was the acceptance of the Islamic faith and thus gain the trust of the governing bodies. This condition resulted in the acceptance of Islam on the part of a large number of noblemen as well as aristocratic families of Albanian origin who did this in order to retain their privileges. If they lost them they would not be able to keep their high state positions. The islamization of the areas populated by Albanians was developing very slowly. This process is visible from the cadastral registers of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century. Most of the population still followed the Christian faith and only after the second half of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17 century did the process of Islamization begin to spread more rapidly.

Scholarly material reveals that until the end of the 15th century the Ottomans did not pursue, in any way, an islamisation policy, either in our own regions or in other Balkan countries. However, since the early 16th century a decrease in the number of Christian timars can be observed, as well as a decrease in social prestige, which gradually led to the liquidation of the Christian sipahis' timars and the loss of the tax privileges enjoyed by some of the privileged strata (vleh, vojnik, martolos). This situation definitely influenced the Christian sipahis towards accepting Islam. The Christian peasantry in Kosovo and Macedonia obtained economic benefits after accepting Islam insofar as they were exempted from taxes paid by all adult Christians as an equivalent of service in the Ottoman army. This tax covered a sum of one to two ispenxhe. The ispenxhe (land tax) represents the largest feudal tax in cash (25 akce). The acceptance of Islam and entry into the feudal class opened up many favourable social positions to the Christians. In the early 15th century the Ottomans incorporated a vast number of small Christian sipahis by giving them timars without any conditions apart from showing sincere loyalty to the Sultan and the Ottoman government and belonging to the sipahi military class. There were also other economic, psychological and cultural elements which led to the spread of Islam. One of the most important was that since the very beginning of their administration their principle had been to give special attention to Muslims and to ask for total support for the Muslim element. A very important role in the spread of Islam among the Christians was that of the wandering Ahi dervishes who won over the Christians through their high tolerance. The role of the waqfs and other cultural-educational institutions was also significant. A huge influence was also exerted by the incorporation of Christian sipahis into the community of Muslim sipahis. In the early period of Ottoman administration religious differences led to no significant partition. It was regarded as normal for young adults who had made a formal acceptance of Islam but continued to live with their Christian parents as well as the wives of young Muslims to retain their Christian names. Young Muslims and Christians combined their incomes, testified in court and helped each other in every way. Their Christian origin was not a problem.

However, the development of Muslim towns (kasaba) as Ottoman administrative centres, as well as the construction of religious buildings with

Islamic-Ottoman architecture, secured better living conditions for the Muslims, who had begun to experience a feeling of polarization, especially in cultural terms. The neighbourhoods of Muslim cities were built according to oriental architectural norms surrounded by walls and with closed doors, in contrast to the Christian parts of the city.<sup>9</sup>

The Ottoman state, according to Sharia, accepted all monotheistic religions. The freedom of non-Muslims was assured by the Ottoman state. This indicates that the Ottoman administration did not use Islam as a trigger for the forcible Islamization of the Balkan population.

According to the 15<sup>th</sup> century registers it is obvious that in the beginning timars, zeamets and feus (Immigrants from Anatolia and Rumelia, but there were few Christian Albans from Kosovo and Macedonia who had their minor timars. After the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most of the timar-feuds were possessed by local Christians of Albanian origin who had converted to Islam. But, unlike the situation in Kosovo and Macedonia, the process of development of the Ottoman timar was against the interests of a part of the powerful Albanian princes and nobles who ruled independently over central Albania. They refused to renounce political power and lose their properties and therefore rose in rebellion under Skanderbeg against the establishment of Ottoman power and timar system in central Albania, a rebellion that lasted for about a quarter of a century.

These rebellions were followed by serious consequences causing havoc and extensive damage as well as numerous human casualties. Finally, seeing the superiority of the Ottoman army, a number of these nobles gradually began to join the Ottoman military timar system, first as Christians, then as Muslims, thus reaching high positions in the Ottoman administration such as Viziers and Grand Viziers while other nobles emigrated to Italy or Spain.

Based on medieval documents, it can be said that central Albania had been occupied in the classic sense from the time of the Ottoman Empire, having managed to become independent from Byzantium, although a part of it was still held under the rule of Venice, while northeastern Albania, medieval Kosovo, was liberated from centuries of Slavic-Serbian rule by the Ottoman army in the years 1454/55, with the participation of military sipahis of Albanian origin from Macedonia who had been converted to Islam in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and were involved in the Ottoman timar system.

Some Christian Albanian nobles from Kosovo, such as Rajko and Bogdan Krizmiq (Krizmajt) from Prizren, Pjeter and Lesh Spanoviq (Spanajt) from Novaberda, Gjergj Mazreku and Nikolla Mazreku from Novaberda or from the Mazrek village of Vranja, and Musiq (Muzakajt) from the village of Muzaq of Toplic, Zhivko and Gjuka Kastrati from Kushumlia, Nikoll Peci from Decani and many others who had entered the service of the medieval Serbian administration in Kosovo and whose ancestors had been converted and Slavicized. Since they had lost their national feelings and traditions they saw no reason to struggle in order to win independence from the Slavs, as did the central Albanian nobles who fought against the Greeks and Slavs.

It is an undeniable fact that the establishment of Ottoman administration was established in the northeast area of Albany, Once included in the Ottoman administration, rule was finally restored from Nis in the north to Stip in the south, where there had previously been ancient Albanian settlements conquered by Slavs, as well as Epirus territory conquered by the Greeks.

The conversion of the majority of medieval Albanians to Islam under those historical circumstance, was the only way of saving the ethnic whole from assimilation by the Slavs and the Greeks as well as giving protection to their lands under the Ottoman imperial umbrella. It is also a fact that the establishment and strengthening of the Ottoman administration in Kosovo and Macedonia led to the final destruction of the state apparatus that had been in the hands of the Serbian medieval feudal class and of the dominant position of the Serbian church.

The abandonment of Slavic names by the Albanian population and the acceptance of Islam meant the replacement of Orthodox Slavic names by names of Latin-Roman origin and also ,gradually, from the oriental-Islamic sphere. The phenomenon of the Albanian population leaving the Orthodox Slav anthroponymia and adopting traditional Albanian names of Roman and later Islamic origin came as a result of historical conditions and circumstances during the period of Ottoman rule.

Regarding the spread of Islam among the Albanians of central Albania, the famous Czech historian, Konstantin Jireček, stated that while, after the wars with the Ottoman Empire, some Albanian princes were finally forced to emigrate to neighbouring countries, more especially to Italy and

Greece, some of the Albanian nobles remained in their own country and gradually began to accept Islam and to join the Ottoman administration. The historian Jirecek notes that Ottoman laws were more liberal than the laws of the other Balkan states of that time. For the lower Balkan classes and the peasants, the new Ottoman government seems to have been more lenient in terms of taxes and other obligations to the state than the old Balkan governments.

As far as the difference between the central Ottoman administration and the local Balkan administration is concerned, while the Dushan Code required the villagers to work on the owner's land two days a week Ottoman laws required villagers to work only three days a year on the sipahi's land. The protection of the peasants from excessive exploitation by local authorities was the main principle of the Ottoman administration. At the same time Ottoman law officially recognized the Orthodox Church (Greek-Slavic), and suppressed the Catholic Church in the Balkans during the entire period of their rule because of the policy of this church in acting against Ottoman power in the Balkans. Vladislav Skarić considered that the spread of Islam in the Balkans did not develop rapidly and the Ottoman conquerors were tolerant to some degree in religious terms and rarely forced the Christians to switch to Islam.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the spread of Islam developed very slowly. Just a few Albanian nobles and small groups of the richer classes accepted Islam, and then mainly for its economic benefits and in order to maintain their social positions. During the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Islam began to spread at a faster pace in the cities, and at a slower pace in the rural settlements.

The following are some data on the number of Muslim Christian houses in urban centers, and of religious structures in urban and semi-urban centers.

In the kasaba of Vilçiterrn, which was the capital of the sandzak, the Muslim community was registered, according to the 1477 timar register, as having 64 houses and the Christian community 94, while other urban districts were not registered at this time, for some reason. In 1478, ten years later, the Muslim community in Vuilçiterrn was registered as having only 43 houses and four Christian mahallas (neighborhoods) with a total of 76

houses. The reason for the reduction of the number of Muslim houses to 21 and of the Christian houses to 18 is not known, unless their inhabitants moved to rural areas, as in this register we sometimes find records of one or sometime two houses in a total of 50 houses in 30 rural settlements in the Vilçiterrn sandzak. A century later, according to a detailed register of the Vlçiterrn sandzak in 1566-74, 228 Muslim and only 58 Christian houses were registered in the town mentioned above .

In 1477 there were 41 Muslim houses in Prishtina. Even though the Muslim community was not registered, Christian neighborhoods appear with a total of 288 houses where the total number of houses was 329, which indicates that the number had increased by 41, since these Muslim houses belonged to the Sultan for taxation purposes, so they did not form a part of the Vilçiterrn bejlerbeg. In 1478 the Muslim community was registered as having 51 houses as part of the zeamet (feudi) of the Vilçiterrn sandzakbeg, which had grown by only 10 houses. According to the 1566/74 register, Pristina had 307 Muslim and 199 Christian houses.

In the city of Novaberda, no Muslim community is registered in the (1497/98) register at the end of the 15th century. Such a community certainly existed but, since it was part of the hass (feud) of the Sultan for taxation purposes it remained off the record. Therefore, the opinion of the renowned orientalist Nedim Filipovic from Sarajevo was, that although this register did not include any Muslim houses, this does not mean that at this time no Muslim community existed in this city. This register included 25 individuals with Muslim names who were possessors of bashtina. Four or five came as officials from abroad while the others seemed to have been Islamized local residents, although only two of them kept their cognomen Abdullah instead of the previous Christian surname. According to the 1566/74 register in Novaberda there were 138 Muslim and 228 Christian houses.

In Janova in 1497-98, besides the four Christian quarters there was also an **Albanian Quarter**, which was entered in the register as a **Mahalle-i Arbanas** with 90 Catholic houses but no Muslim heads of family. Even according to the 1566-74 register in Janova there were only 45 Muslim houses and 288 Christian houses. Trepca had only 96 Muslim houses and 353 Christian homes.

In Prizren according to the 1530 register, there were 278 Muslim houses and

222 Christian houses, and the subsequent register of 1591 shows that there were 320 Muslim houses and 237 Christian houses. In Peja- Ipek, according to the sandzak of Shkodra in the 1485 register, there were only 35 Muslim houses and 105 Christian houses, while a century later, according to the 1582 register, Peja had 142 Muslim and only 15 Christian houses. In Opoja nahije, according to the 1591 register there were 233 Muslim houses but only 64 Christian houses. Even in the Hocha nahije in 1591 there were 248 Muslim houses.

From the above data it is clear that in urban areas in which Ottoman local administration and Islamic religious sites located, during the second half of 16th century more than half of the population had accepted Islam, but this process was developing at a very slow pace in the rural areas, especially in the Vilçitern sandzak, where the majority of the population from the villages were still Christian, except in Opoja and the Hocha nahije. This process also developed at a slow pace in Novaberda, Janova and Trepça and their suburbs, where some Catholic churches and Catholic priests still existed. During the 15th and 16th centuries and half of the 17th century, religious services were performed without major restriction, but after the wars between Austria and the Ottoman Empire that took place in 1683-1690 the situation of the Albanian Catholic population, and especially that of the Catholic clergy in Kosovo and Macedonia, greatly deteriorated.

In the absence of the Catholic priests and the new situation created after these wars, some of this population accepted Islam and some the Slavic Orthodox religion, as the clergy and the Slavonic Church developed their own activities without hindrance. Initially, during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Islam was accepted only by a few individuals and by Albanians belonging to the aristocracy who previously had a certain social standing.

The spread of Islam to a part of the Albanian population who lived in the territory of Macedonia and who favoured the Bogumilizm movement that had begun much earlier than in Kosovo through contact with wandering Ahi Dervishes, especially after 1391-92 when the Ottoman administration and government was definitely established in Skopje. According to Slavic sources, some Albanian settlements encountered in this area 100 years before the Ottoman penetration included various other ethnicities. Since the Slavic population had their churches and monasteries protected by Otto-

man law they did not see any necessity in converting to Islam, except in rare cases when individuals or nobles wished to preserve feudal holdings and their social positions or occupy high positions in the Ottoman administration. But, as we have noted, the Christian Albanian population had their churches occupied and turned into Slavic ones during the medieval and Bulgarian eras. Thus the Ottoman penetration in Macedonia, just as in Kosovo, interrupted the Slavization of the Albanian population. The main centers, where the process of Islamization began to take root, were Skopje, Tetovo, Ohrid, Debar, Kicevo, Bitola, Kumanovo etc. On the establishment of Ottoman power in these centers, Skopje and Tetovo were initially formed as administrative units of the Ottoman administration in the form of vilayets and then as sandjaks. According to the oldest Rumelia register of 1451/53 for the Macedonian area, it appears as a property of the great vezir of Rumelia, encompassing 25 villages. While, in the city of Skopje, which was included as an administrative center in the properties owned by Ali Bey (who was of Albanian origin), in 1451-53 there were 23 Muslim mahallas with 434 Muslim houses and 72 individuals and 8 Christian mahallas with 312 houses, according to the 1467/68 register in Skopje there were 33 mahallas with 637 Muslim houses and 11 Christian mahallas with 277 houses. Fifteen years later the Muslim population had doubled. In the second half of the 16th century, according to the 1568/69 register, Skopje had 52 Muslim mahallas with around 1,240 houses and 8 Christian mahallas with 210 houses. From these data, it is obvious that over a century the number of houses of the Muslim population had doubled or increased to 603, while the Christian population had been reduced to 102 houses. It is known that Albanian names in the middle ages were the same as the Christian names even after Islamization, so it is difficult to determine ethnicity based on nomenclature, but the definition of ethnicity must be based on the names and characteristics of the population's ethnonym, as well as on the basis of linguistic forms that differ with their ethnicity extensions. Therefore anthroponomical and patronymic data and the 15th century Ottoman registers provide indisputable evidence that confirms the presence of an Albanian population not only in the urban settlements but also in rural areas of present day Macedonia before the Ottoman penetration in the Balkans.

In the Ahriyan Hasan mahalla of Skopje in the 1451-53 register a person

with a medieval Albanian background who had been converted to Islam, was registered merely with the surname Muzaka, without mentioning his name and profession, while the Christian mahalla Svetko Samarci of Skopje in the 1467/68 register had a householder named Nikolla, the son of a Muzaka who had not yet been converted to Islam. It seems these two residents of Skopje of Albanian origin, one Muslim and the other Christian, were relatives who both lived in Skopje. They were also blood relations to Ivan and Radislav Muzaka from the Ponorisht village of Tetovo, with typical names belonging to the Slavic Orthodox rite. In the "Menteshali Ali" mahalla of Skopje, the 1467 / 8 register recorded among other Muslim household heads Hamza Arnauti, who had his timar in the Gumaleva village of Skopje. The 1451/52 register in the Skopje village of Niçevo registered a different head named Hamza Arnauti along with other Muslim heads who had been converted to Islam. In the 1451/53 register in the city of Skopje there were eight Christian mahallas recorded. One of these was registered with the medieval Albanian family name in the Slavic form Gjinko (Gjinaj). TD.III, p.166. Researchers from Skopje, Prof. M. Sokoloski and Dr. A. Stojanovski, have not succeeded in deciphering the Ottoman paleographic handwriting of this microtoponym of Albanian origin and presents a distorted transcription in the form of MaloGenko instead of the Mahala Gjinko in the original (Mahale-i Cinkko) deriving from the patronym Gjinaj of a medieval Albanian family.

Many Albanian families with the patronymic Gjinaj were encountered in many medieval settlements in the territory of Macedonia and Kosovo during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This mahala had 58 Christian heads, among them heads of Albanian origin: **Gjin-ko, Todor-i Gjin's brother, Mark-o Gjin's son** etc., while a century later, in 1568/69, this mahala (neighborhood) had 53 Muslim heads and only 3 Christian. From these data in the Ottoman register it is obvious that most of the 15<sup>th</sup> century heads bearing Christian and typically Slavic names in urban and rural northern and western Macedonia belonging to converts to Islam were Albanian, not of Slavic origin.

In the 1467 / 8 register, the **Mahale-i Yazici** Shahin in Skopje, also recorded among other Muslim household heads a certain **Alban Zenebishi**, who converted to Islam without revealing his occupation or position. He

belonged to the noble Christian family of Gjon Zenebish, which at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup>, had extended its power in the Polog valley of Tetovo, and a branch of this family also included **Zenebishi Hasan Bey** who, according to the 1451/53 register, was appointed to the position of Subash of Tetovo vilayet. His properties included 11 settlements, which included Gostivar and the ancient residence of Sobri.

Muslim settlements mentioned in the register of the year 1451/53 in the district of Skopje included the Topçe Ishakli residence, which had 20 Muslim houses. Among the household heads of this place there were two Albanian heads: **Hamza Prenka and Yusuf Arnauti**. The latter had his own timar in Macedonia and Kosovo.

In the town of Tetovo, according to the 1451/53 registers, the Muslim community owned 60 houses. Among the Muslim household heads there were also five heads of Albanian origin who had converted to Islam: John's son Yusuf, Ulkos' son Hamza, Domjan's son Murad, Jonçes' son Mustafa and Mjellki's son Hamza. There were 146 Christian houses. TD.III. pp. 103.

Just 18 years later, in 1467/68, there was a slight change. The Christian population of Tetovo had increased from 153 houses to 180, while the Muslim population had decreased from 60 to 41. However, a century later, according to the 1568/69 register, there was a noticeable change of religious structure in the town of Tetovo, where the Muslim population from 6 mahallas had now increased sixfold, with more than 390 houses, while the Christian population of 5 mahallas was reduced by 87 leaving only 97.

Even in the town of Kicevo, the Muslim community had, according to the 1467/68 registers, 31 Muslim houses. The Slav-Serb Mahala had 90 houses while the Arnavut Mahala had 55 houses. A century later, according to the 1568/69 registers, the town of Kicevo had 90 Muslim houses, showing that during this time the Muslim population of the city had increased threefold while the Christian population who lived in the two above-mentioned mahalas fell to 81 houses, leaving only 64. In the town of Pripep, according to the 1467/68 register, there were two mahallas with 21 Muslim houses while, according to the 1568/69 register, there were 325 Muslim houses and 320 Christian houses.

From the above-mentioned data it would appear that in the second half of the 16th century most of the population in the urban areas of western Mace-

donia, especially in Skopje, Tetovo, Kicevo, Ohrid and Bitola, were Muslim and the minority Christian. But in Macedonian rural areas, at this time (the 15th century) the majority of the population was Christian. During the second half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century, the spread of Islam grew more rapidly, so in most rural areas the Muslim population was dominant until 1912/13 when, after the collapse of the Ottoman administration, Serbia, with Russian help, occupied the Ottoman Vilayet of Kosov, including the territory which forms part of present day Macedonia.

Serbia, in order to change the ethnic and religious structure initiated an aggressive and national-chauvinist policy in carrying out ethnic cleansing of the native Muslim population through its transfer programs with the secret sign (*Strogo poverljivo*) already known in Balkan historiography, and managed, in 1912 – 1941, to transfer to Turkey around 400,000 Muslims (Albanians and Turks) from Kosovo and Macedonia.

The following notes offer some information concerning the sipahi-timariot of Albanian origin from present day Kosovo and Macedonia, which we have researched and extracted from the Vilçiterrn sandzhak registers of the 15th century (1455, 1477 and 1478), as well as the 1451/53 and 1467 / 8 registers belonging to the vilayets of Skopje and Tetovo.

It is important to know, not only for Albanian historiography but rather for foreign historiography, and especially for that of the Slavs, which tends to deny that that these sipahis and many others not included in this article, as well as the later begs, how pashas and vezirs were brought by the central Albanian Ottoman administration, ostensibly on “Serb holy land”, to Albanize the Serbs of Kosovo and Macedonia, because according to counterfeit Serb historiography, there was no Albanian population in Kosovo and Macedonia before the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This false Serbian thesis has been undermined not only by material from the Central Ottoman Archives in İstanbul and Ankara but also from the archives in Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Rome, Vatican, Venice and Vienna. Counterfeiters of Serbian historiography know that in their own 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the sources regarding the Albanians and their habitats in Kosovo and Macedonia were marked: Arbanasi of year 1254, the Toplice Muzaq village in 1318, and in Macedonia, the Arbanashka village in

Kumanovo since 1330, with hundreds of other Albanian settlements that appear to have been registered in official Ottoman administration registers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and clearly show that the native Albanian population has lived continuously in these countries since ancient and medieval times, not only immediately before the arrival of the Ottomans but also much earlier, before the penetration of the Slavs in the Balkans from the Carpathian steppes of Russia.

According to the Vilik vilayet (Kosovo Plain) register of 1455, the Ottoman and sipahi zeamet and timar were registered as properties of the Mirialem of the Vilik vilayet. Of the many sipahis who came from Rumelia and Anadolia, we find registered some holders of the first timars of Albanian origin from Kosovo and Macedonia.

Regarding the timar belonging to Hamza in the village of Dolna Tushimla in the nahije of Vilçiterrn, Hamza, (without mentioning his Christian surname) is registered as a Muslim from the Vilayet-i Vilik and this timar was registered on his behalf since his participation was required in the military expeditions. The village had 10 houses with 10 heads bearing Christian Slavic names, but among them there two heads of Albanian origin as household heads, namely: **Novak**, **Arnaout's** son and **Jovan**, **Hamzah's** brother - the owner of this timar, which proves that it was from the Kosova settlement not from Central Albania. These two pieces of evidence and hundreds of others that we have encountered in the Ottoman records clearly show that the Albanian population from Kosovo and Macedonia, under the influence of the pravoslav administration and church had been forced to take typical Slavic names. The following provides further evidence that medieval Albanians in present day Kosovo and Macedonia settlements were indigenous and were forcibly converted to the Orthodox faith. Behadir possessed a timar, Morava a çeribash while his own sons Hamza and Ali together possessed a timar in the village of Stublla in Morava. This sipahi in the Rumelia 1451-53 register was registered in the village Poroj (Prroj), Tetovo with the full name and surname of Behadir Shoqi's son. It was the only Muslim name to be found among the heads of other Christians. The pathronym Shoqi has a meaning only in Albanian and was used by the Albanian population in the Middle Ages. Among the 70 Christian household heads registered were: Nichola, Arnaout's son and Dimitri, Arnaout's son, which proves that they

were native to this settlement because they paid *ispenxhe* and other taxes. Yusuf Arnaout's timar, which included three villages in the Morava nahije, was originally the residence of Topçe Ishakli near Drançeva of Skopje. Ali Bey's timar included 27 settlements in Vilçiterrn and the nahije of Morava. Ali Bey is identical with the Gazi Ali Bey who, according to a source in the Ottoman Archives in İstanbul, was Isa Bey 's brother and Evronos Bey's son and who was of Albanian origin, so he emerges as a noble native Albanian. At this time the Sultan entrusted him with the administration in Vilayet-i Vilk and later in the Vilçiterrn Sandzak founded in 1462. Ali Beg built the oldest mosque in 1444 and the public toilet (bath) in Vilçiterrn, in the territory of Kosovo. However, an inscription on a tombstone found in the mosque courtyard, which was deciphered by Andrea Hercher of Harvard University, indicates that the Gazi Ali Bey Mosque was built in 1410, but the exact date should be questioned further because the stone was very damaged and it is not known whether it was accurately deciphered. Unfortunately, this stone does not exist today, due to the negligence of the Islamic community bodies, who failed to ensure that the stone was put under the protection of our cultural and historical heritage in good time. Shirmerd Arnaout's timar included two villages in the Vilçiterrn nahije. Nicholas, Zogonosi's brother, was another Zaganos cousin who had his own timar in the village of Vilçiterrn, Babnos.

The timar of Zogonosi, another Vilçiterrn çeribash cousin, had a timar in Stugjinci.

Sinan Bey 's zeamet included 21 villages in the Kalopotnik nahije.

Muhammed Arnaout's timar included 4 villages in the Llap nahije.

Arnaout Karaxhoz's timari included 4 villages in the Llap nahije.

Hasan Bey Zenebish zeameti included 14 villages in the Morava nahije.

Onuç Ibrahim Arnaout's timar included two villages in the Llap nahije.

Arnaout Shahini's timar included two villages in the Morava nahije.

Ali Zogaonos' timar included 4 villages in the Vilçiterrn nahije.

Hamza Beligrad's (Berat's) timar of timar included a village in Llap nahije.

Jako and Kostë's timar included a village in the Llap nahije.

Ayas Kuki's brother Ibrahim's timar, included three villages in the Llap nahije.

Mustafa, George's brother's timar, included 4 villages in the Tetovo nahije.

Ferhat Arnaout's timar included a village in the Tetovo nahije.

Ali Arnaout's timar included two villages in Tetovo vilayet.

Yusuf Arnaout's timar included 3 villages in Tetovo vilayet.

Arnaut Sinan's timar included 2 villages in the Morava.

Emin Novoberdali's timar included a village in the Topanic nahije.

Hizri Prizreni's timar included a village in the Morava nahije.

Ali Pristina's timar included two villages in the Tetovo vilayet.

Dukagjini's timar included a village in the Tetovo vilayet.

Hamza Arnaout's timar included a village in the sandzak of Skopje.

The timar held by Sahin Arnout, dizdar of Skopje Castle, included three vilages of Skopje.

Lazar Arnaout's timar included two vilages in the Sandzak of Dukagjin.

Ali and Hamza Kirçovali's timar included one vilage in the Tetovo vilayet.

Gjin Arnout's timar included one vilage in the sandzak of Prizren.

Yani Arnout's timar included one vilage in the sandzak of Prizren.

## Conclusion

The Ottoman administration and the sandzak and vilayets forming administrative and territorial units of present day Kosovo and Macedonia, which remained for centuries under foreign occupation, interrupted Slavization, first of all through state and religious institutions and the Greek conversion of the Albanian population, while, on the other hand, Islam was spread by peaceful means (such as economic benefit) not administratively.

The Islamic and Ottoman timar systems enabled Albanians to enter the Ottoman political scene and thus achieve participation in society and the Ottoman administration by taking up positions in Ottoman religious and state institutions up to the rank of ministers and prime ministers.

The Ottoman administration succeeded in restoring the administration and governance in all the sandzaks and vilayets founded on Albanian soil inhabited by an Albanian majority. During the Ottoman period, according to Ottoman and Western archival sources, except for several mosques and

other cultural and historical monuments built by Sultan Murad II and Fatih Sultan Mehmet II, the other hundred or so Islamic religious buildings and waqfs and charitable institutions who ministered the Muslim population in general, regardless of their ethnicity, were built by Muslim pashas of Albanian origin.

Material evidence indicates that Islam was spread by force neither in Albanian lands nor in other Balkan countries, as the Ottomans, from the beginning of their rule had involved young Christian sipahis (who were oppressed by the feudal lords), and were given timars simply on the condition that they should show genuine loyalty to the Sultan and the highest organs of the state. Islam, with its principles, contributed to the release of the Albanian population from the pressure of the Greek and Slavic churches which, during the medieval period, tended to convert the population to the Orthodox religion and to assimilate it in ethnic terms.

Islam, as a tolerant religion, never, throughout the 500 years of Ottoman rule in the Ottoman vilayets and sandzaks inhabited by an Albanian population, allowed the customs, traditions and popular languages to disappear, even though officially education in the Albanian language was not permitted. Actually, there was in any case no great risk of its disappearance because in everyday life the Albanian language was spoken freely by the population at large. Even in the Kosovo vilayet officials of Albanian origin communicated in Albanian, and even some ministers occupying high positions in İstanbul often communicated in Albanian with Albanian officials. According to Ottoman documents and also to Merre Hasan Pasha, one of the Pashas who served in the administration in İstanbul, the Albanian language was also spoken alongside the official Turkish language.

Merre Hasan Pasha spoke Albanian to his Albanian officials who at that time were serving in the Ottoman administration in İstanbul and also gave orders in Albanian, such as "Take this document and do your job". He was a vezir pasha who got an official nickname as the Albanian word "merre" (take) that he used to use in communication with his officials. Having completed this article, we can affirm that the Ottoman Empire, that lived and ruled here for nearly 500 years, preserved its rights and laws, which were democratic enough for that time, as well as preventing any dis-

crimination on an ethnic or racial basis or the implementation of a policy of assimilation on the Christian population.

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