

## POLOG DURING THE PERIOD OF THE 11<sup>TH</sup> CT – 1355

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### Abstract

The object of study of this paper is the Polog valley during the period of the 11<sup>th</sup> ct. to 1355. The concept Arbëri and Polog will be addressed in particular, as well as the involvement of this region within the ethno-geographic borders of medieval Albania. Thus, the achievements in the fields of archaeology, history, linguistics, prove that Polog valley has been involved in the east side of the Albanian lands during the Middle Ages and the presence of the Albanian ethnos in these settlements.

This paper will also address the political situation of Polog in the 11<sup>th</sup> ct to 1355 using the data extracted from the sources of the time. These sources inform us about the political position the valley held during the Bulgarian, Byzantine, Serbian, Epirote and Nicaean rule.

The historical data presented in this paper enable us to get to know the main routes that crossed Polog during the Middle Ages used for internal economic and cultural communication as well as with neighboring countries. We have also identified the settlements and religious facilities and their properties in Polog.

*Keywords:* Polog, Albanians, settlements, routes, religious facilities

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### Introduction

To delve into the core of the issue under consideration, this study focuses on the continuity of the Illyrian-Arberian population during the early Middle Ages in the Albanian territories, including the Pollog region. This stands in opposition to the claims of Slavic historiography, which, citing the absence of written sources from the early Arberian Middle Ages, refutes such continuity. Acknowledging the scarcity of scholarly work on Pollog during this period, this study seeks to make a modest contribution and serve as a foundation for further, more comprehensive research.

In line with this approach, we first present material evidence, represented by the Koman culture, alongside linguistic data and the political conditions of the early Middle Ages in the Arberian territories, with a particular emphasis on the ethno-geographical concept of Arberia, which included the Pollog region. This evidence serves to demonstrate the continuous and uninterrupted presence of the Arberian population. In this context, we offer historical facts concerning the local population of Pollog, demonstrating that despite foreign dominion and local political control, the inhabitants of this region succeeded in preserving their distinct identity.

The study, which examines Pollog from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to 1355, critically engages with Byzantine and Slavic sources to explore issues that had a sustained impact on the everyday life of the local population, including political-military, socio-cultural, religious, demographic, and economic aspects. With particular regard to the issue of Illyrian-Arberian continuity, the study presents historical evidence that convincingly affirms the presence of the Arberian population in this region during the medieval period. This is further corroborated by ecclesiastical sources from the era of the Serbian kings, as well as property records from the Monastery of St. Mary, where Albanian ethnonyms and anthroponyms are documented.

Furthermore, the political dynamics of Pollog are examined, beginning with the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century,

when the Bulgarian state persistently expanded its western borders, encompassing Arberian territories. This expansion reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Samuel (976–1014), under whose rule the Pollog region was also incorporated. Subsequently, Norman incursions into Arberian territories during the final two decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century yielded the first recorded mention of Pollog, as noted by Anna Komnena. During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, amidst significant political upheaval, Pollog alternated between the control of the Epirotes, Bulgarians, and the Empire of Nicaea, until after 1261, when the restoration of the Byzantine Empire brought the region under its administration.

Additionally, an invaluable source for the settlements of Pollog comes from the Arab geographer al-Idrisi, who in his 1154 work *Geography*, mentions the city of Pollog and details the major routes passing through Macedonia, such as Ohrid-Pollog-Skopje and Ohrid-Bitola-Thessaloniki. In this regard, local and regional roads frequented by the indigenous population, both within the region and with neighboring areas, are also considered. Alongside the road network, numerous settlements existed in Pollog, as pre-Ottoman sources attest to the presence of over 50 settlements. These settlements were governed by both secular feudal lords and religious institutions, particularly monasteries.

### **The concept Arberia and Polog**

The lack of historical sources concerning the local Illyrian-Arberian population in early Middle Ages, and on the other hand, the recording of events about different peoples which passed through and the ones which settled in the Balkan Peninsula, does not mean that the local population has vanished. In fact, the chroniclers of the time documented the movements, upheavals, and transformations they brought because these events posed a threat of a political or military nature to the Byzantine state authority, while remaining silent regarding the ancient local population, which in these circumstances did not pose any reason or cause to mention them. Such factors contributed to the delayed emergence of the Albanians' name onto the historical stage during the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, this void of historical sources facilitated the propagation of various Slavic theses, all sharing a commonality: refuting the Illyrian-Arberian continuity of the regions inhabited by the same populace since ancient times till today. Particularly, certain Slavic "scholars," especially Serbian, starting from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and notably amplifying during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, endeavored through a multitude of papers, works and articles, to assert that the regions occupied by Albanians, particularly Kosovo,<sup>3</sup> Macedonia,<sup>4</sup> including the Polog province, were not inhabited by Albanians throughout the Middle Ages.

The lack of written sources for the arbers of the early Middle Ages, however, is primarily filled by archaeological material, as well as the field of linguistic studies. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the discovery of 1898 when a large cemetery was found near the Castle of Dalmaca, in the village of Koman in Puka. It got the name *The Koman Culture*<sup>5</sup> from the village.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Koman culture was enriched even more with new findings, not only in Albania but also in the countries outside its borders, where the autochthonous Albanians<sup>6</sup> live today. Several of these localities are the cemeteries of Afiona on the island of Corfu, those of Milje on the shores of Lake Shkodra (Montenegro), Saint Erazm, Orovnik and

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<sup>1</sup> Aleks Buda, *Rreth disa çështjeve të historisë së formimit të popullit shqiptar, të gjuhës e të kulturës së tij*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 24, 25; Kristo Frashëri, *Trojet e shqiptarëve në shek. XV*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 208; Gjon Berisha, *Arbërorët ndërmjet kishës perëndimore dhe asaj lindore gjatë shekujve XI-XV*, Prishtinë, 2017, f. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Muhamet Tërnav, *Popullsia e Kosovës gjatë shekujve XIV-XV*, Prishtinë, 1995, f. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Kristo Frashëri, *Trojet e shqiptarëve në shek. XV...*, f. 208.

<sup>5</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, Tiranë, 2002, f. 209; Skënder Anamali, *Nga ilirët tek Arbërit*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 109; Qerim Dalipi, *Inkursionet osmane në trevat shqiptare deri më 1402*, Kërçovë, 2002, f. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Muzafer Kërkuçi, *Parailirët, ilirët, arbërit*, Tiranë, 2003, f. 69.

Ladorishte near the city of Ohrid, as well as the discoveries in the vicinity of the city of Prilep. The archaeological composition found in these cemeteries is generally the same, portraying a culture of an autochthonous population which was on the threshold from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages (6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century). The artifacts within the abundant inventory, including jewelry, weaponry, tools, pottery, and more, contain both Illyrian elements and influences of the early Byzantine culture, which proves that this culture had a continuity and character of ancient locals, which, as the researcher Skender Anamali says, it not only proves a cultural continuity but also a residential and ethnic continuity where Albanians live today.<sup>7</sup>

Due to restricted archaeological diggings, the cultural nature of the Polog province remains relatively obscure, but it is very likely to be similar to the areas where the Roman culture has been discovered.<sup>8</sup>

Due to insufficient archaeological research, Macedonian historiography denies the continuity of the Illyrian-Arberian Albanians in Macedonia, including Polog. According to these records, life in the Illyrian settlements was completely disrupted upon the Slavs' settlement in Polog. They argue that a segment of the local population vanished, another portion relocated to mountainous regions, while the remainder assimilated into the Slavs.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, scientific findings, drawing from historical sources, demonstrate that Slavic settlement from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> ct. in the Illyrian-Arberian territories was sporadic and significantly smaller in comparison to the autochthonous population, which managed to withstand the Slavic colonization.<sup>10</sup> In addition, another argument that proves the Illyrian-Arberian continuity is the political continuity of the four Illyrian provinces such as Preval, Dardania, Old Epirus and New Epirus, which represented the geographical territory inhabited by Albanians throughout the Middle Ages, as well as the survival of a series of Illyrian-Arberian cities-castles such as: Berat, Durres, Lezha, Shkodra, Nikopoja, Skopje, Ohrid, etc., which speak of the uninterrupted urban life and Byzantine power in these areas.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, the achieved results in the field of toponymy linguistics, such as the names of cities like Ulqin-Ulkinion, Nish-Naissus, Shkupi-Scupi, Ohrid-Lyhnis, Durrës-Durrachion, Arta-Arachthos, Shtip-Astribus, among others, along with geographical features like Sharr-Scardus mountain, Drin-Drinus river, Vardar-Axios river, serve as indisputable evidence supporting the Illyrian-Arberian continuity. These names find linguistic explanation solely through the Albanian language.<sup>12</sup>

From the above, the researcher Eqerem Çabej has rightly concluded that *the current settlement of Albanians is not a territory of expansion, but a territory of restriction, the end of a continuous narrowing throughout Albanian history.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Krah.: Skender Anamali, *Nga ilirët tek Arbërit...*, f. 109; i njëjti, *Varreza arbërore pranë liqenit të Ohrit*, në: "Shqiptarët e Maqedonisë", Tetovë, 1994, f. 35; i njëjti, *Problemi i formimit të popullit shqiptarë dritën e të dhënave arkeologjike*, në: "Konferenca kombëtare për formimin e popullit shqiptar të gjuhës dhe të kulturës së tij", Tiranë, 1988, f. 337-355; i njëjti, *Kosova dhe trevat etnike në hapësirat e ish-Jugosllavisë në mesjetën e hershme*, në: "Çështja e Kosovës një problem historik dhe aktual", Tiranë, 1996, f. 31-36; Muzafer Kërkuçi, *Parailirët...*, f. 70-72; *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 209; Qerim Dalipi, *Arbëria midis Republikës së Venedikut dhe Perandorisë Osmane*, Tetovë, 2012, f. 13-14; i njëjti, *Inkursionet osmane...*, f. 13; Aleksandër Stipçeviç, *Çdo tregim për Ballkanin fillon me ilirët*, në: "E vërteta mbi Kosovën dhe shqiptarët në Jugosllavi", Tiranë, 1990, f. 61.

<sup>8</sup>Muzafer Kërkuçi, *Ilirët dhe Maqedonia në periudhën pre protohistorike*, në: "Shqiptarët e Maqedonisë", Tetovë, 1994, f. 19.

<sup>9</sup>*Историја на македонскиот народ*, Скопје, 1988, f. 26; Томо Томоски, *Македонија низ вековите, градови, тврдини, комуникации*, Скопје, 1999; Јован Ф. Трифуноски, *Полог (Антропогеографска проучувања)*, Београд, 1976; i njëjti, *Стари црквени споменици у СР Македонији*, Београд, 1991; *Тетово и тетовско низ историјата*.

<sup>10</sup>Qerim Dalipi, *Çështja e depërtimeve sllave në trojet iliro-arbërore (shek. VI-IX)*, në: "Albanologji, v. 8, Prishtinë, 2018, f. 269, 270; Jahja Drançolli, *Arbërit ndërmjet perëndimit dhe lindjes gjatë mesjetës*, Zagreb, 2008, f. 21, 54; Kristo Frashëri, *Historia e qytetërimit shqiptar*, Tiranë, 2008; i njëjti, *Trojet shqiptare gjatë mesjetës së hershme*, në: "Konferenca kombëtare për formimin e popullit shqiptar të gjuhës dhe të kulturës së tij", Tiranë, 1988, f. 54-56.

<sup>11</sup>Skender Anamali, *Nga ilirët tek Arbëri...*, f. 111, 112; Qerim Dalipi, *Çështja e depërtimeve sllave...*, 271; *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 203.

<sup>12</sup>Eqerem Çabej, *Vendbanimi i hershëm i shqiptarëve në gadishullin Ballkanik në dritën e gjuhës e të emrave të vendeve*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 50-58; Shaban Demiraj, *Prejardhja e shqiptarëve nën dritën e dëshmive të gjuhës shqipe*, Tiranë, 1999, f. 128-170; Mahir Domi, *Çështje të toponimisë me burime të huaja*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 299-305; Rexhep Ismajli, *Disa çështje të onomastikës mesjetare*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 306, 307.

<sup>13</sup>Eqerem Çabej, *Problemi i autoktonisë së shqiptarëve në dritën e emrave të vendeve*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 44, 45.

In fact, the medieval Arber, located in the area that laid in the quadrant Tivar-Valona-Ohrid-Prizren<sup>14</sup>, respectively in the quadrangle Lezha-Debar-Ohrid-Valona, became the nucleus of the Albanian lands.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the eastern border of the peripheral territories during the Middle Ages extended around the road line Nish-Skopje-Bitola-Kostur-Janina-Arta.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the territory of Polog inhabited by the Illyrian-Arberian population was also a part of this ethnogeographic space.

The Arber ethnonym that is thought to derive from the name of the Illyrian tribe *Albanoi* mentioned by the geographer Ptolemy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> ct.,<sup>17</sup> after a centuries-long silence in the written sources will be mentioned by the Byzantine chronicler M. Ataliati in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> After this century this ethnonym began to be widely used hand in hand in historical sources.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for example in historical sources of the 13-14<sup>th</sup> ct., as is the case with the Byzantine writer G. Pachymeres, who, speaking about the inhabitants of New Epirus, uses the name Albanite in one case and the name Illyrians in another case. Meanwhile, in the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there are frequent instances of substituting the term *the albanas* with *makedon*. Consequently, foreigners referred to the inhabitants of the Albanian linguistic area as *Epirotes* and *Albanite*, *Epirotes et Albanenses*, or Epirotes and Macedonians, *Epyrote et Macedones*.<sup>20</sup> The use of the name *macedones*, in the first place, had references to the historical tradition, however, we can note that these chroniclers did not hesitate to draw a parallel between the appellation *Alban* and *Macedon*, because for them this was only a synonym.

Despite the fact that Polog was continuously under Byzantine, Bulgarian or Serbian rule, its Arberian population had managed to preserve its individuality, being mentioned in the written sources of the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard, firstly, we will mention a charter of Stefan Uros II, which dates back to the year 1300, by which he renewed the monastery of Saint George of Skopje and gave it property, and ordered that everyone who came to the fair of the monastery, be it Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, Latin, Albanian or Vlach, had to pay customs as in Tetovo, the same in Graçanica.<sup>21</sup> While in a charter of Stefan Dushan from the year 1343, with which he renewed the church of Tetova and assigned it property and villages, among which the forest Nanov Dol, he forbade the use of this forest to everyone, including Albanians.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, in the same source, Albanians are mentioned as shepherds, farmers and soldiers in the province of Tetova.<sup>23</sup>

The presence of the arberian ethnos in the Polog valley is also evidenced through anthroponyms and toponyms. Thus, in the register of properties of the monastery of Saint Mary of Tetova, drawn up around the year 1343, it is stated that a disputed site either belongs to *Progon* or to the church, because this property was once the property of the church that was held by two brothers, who have sold this piece of land to *Progon* for three buckets of wine. While one field,

<sup>14</sup> Millan Shufly, *Historia e shqiptarëve të veriut, serbët e shqiptarët*, përkthet: Zekirja Cana, Prishtinë, 1968, f. 114.

<sup>15</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 208.

<sup>16</sup> Gjon Berisha, v. c., f. 74.

<sup>17</sup> *Ilirët dhe Iliria te autorët antik*, përgatitur nga: S. Islami, F. Prendi, H. Ceka, S. Anamali, Tiranë, 2002, f. 268. The Illyrians will be mentioned for the last time in ecclesiastical history in Euagritus in connection with the Byzantine war against the Avars in 584 (Skënder Anamali, *Nga ilirët tek Arbërit*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", f. 107; Muzafer Kërkuti, *Parailirët, Ilirët, Arbërit*, Tiranë, 2003, f. 82).

<sup>18</sup> *Burime tregimtare bizantine për historinë e Shqipërisë (shek. V-XV)*, përgatitur nga: Koço Bozhori – Filip Liço, Tiranë, 1975, f. 46).

<sup>19</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 209; Konstantin Jireček, *Nga Shkodra deri në Vlorë nëpër Shqipërinë mesjetare*, përkthet: Edomon Malaj, Tiranë, 2017, f. 131, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Kristo Frashëri, *Trojet e shqiptarëve në shek. XV...*, f. 203; Kasem Biçoku, *Lidhjet ndërkrahinore dhe ndikimi i tyre në luftën e shqiptarëve kundër pushtuesve osman gjatë shekujve XIV-XV*, në: "Çështja e Kosovës një problem historik dhe aktual", Tiranë, 1996, f. 55; Jahja Drançolli, *Popullsia shqiptare e Kosovës dhe e trojeve të tjera në ish-Jugosllavi gjatë shek. XV-XVII*, në: "Çështja e Kosovës një problem historik dhe aktual", Tiranë, 1996, f. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Skënder Gashi, *Prania e etnosit shqiptar në Kosovë gjatë shekujve XIII-XIV në dritën e nurimeve kishtarë serbe*, në: "Shqiptarët dhe trojet e tyre", Tiranë, 1982, f. 258.

<sup>22</sup> *Законски споменци српских држава средњег века*, прикупно и уредно: Стојан Новаковић, Београд, 1912, f. 660.

<sup>23</sup> Selami Pulaha, *Mbi praninë e shqiptarëve në Kosovë gjatë shekujve XIV-XVII*, në: "E vërteta mbi Kosovën dhe shqiptarët në Jugosllavi", Tiranë, 1990, f. 78.

under the place called Lesht, was given to the church by a certain *Pardo Theodori* for his soul.<sup>24</sup> Both anthroponyms *Progon* and *Pardo* (*Bardo-Bardh*) belong to names of the Albanian language.<sup>25</sup>

### **The political situation (11<sup>th</sup> ct.-1355)**

Around the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgarian state initiated its expansion into the Albanian territories governed by the Byzantine rule.<sup>26</sup> This state reached its largest expansion during Emperor Samuil's era (976-1014), when it included: encompassing the entire Macedonia except Thessaloniki, the majority of Bulgaria, Dardania in its entirety, Thessaly, Nicopoja's territories, Durrës, Dioclea, Travunia, Konavli, Zahumla, Pagania, Bosnia, and Rasha.<sup>27</sup> During this period, the region of Polog was also part of this kingdom. Concurrently, Samuil's principal rival was the Byzantine Emperor Basil II (976-1025), known as the *the Bulgar Slayer*. Basil II's counter-offensive to dismantle the Bulgarian kingdom commenced in 1001, capturing cities like Skopje (1004) and Durres (1005) taking them from Samuil's rule. Consequently, by early 1014, Samuil's rule considerably diminished. A decisive battle waged in mid-1014 at the Kluch Strait on Mount Belasica led to the Bulgarian army's comprehensive defeat,<sup>28</sup> marking Bulgaria's descent into disarray. The incessant wars culminated in Byzantium's victory in 1018, leading to the dissolution of the Bulgarian Empire.<sup>29</sup> Soon after, the Byzantine Empire initiated administrative reorganization in the Balkans, establishing the Theme of Skopje under the leadership of the Arberian patrician David Arianit. This Theme together with the Paradanube Theme included the former territories of the Bulgarian Empire.<sup>30</sup> From this we learn that the territory of Polog was also a part within the framework of the Skopje Theme.

Thus, we also find other data about the political situation of Polog during the two anti-feudal uprisings that broke out in the Balkans against the Byzantine Empire. As in the uprising of 1040 led by Pjeter Deljani, as well as in the one of 1072-1073 led by Bodin and Gjergj Vojtehu, the territories of Polog are included in the wave of these armed uprisings to free themselves from Byzantine rule.<sup>31</sup> which, after the death of Emperor Basil II (1025), was introduced into the deepening process of military feudalism, which resulted in the continuous weakening of the military landholdings (*stratitika ktemata*).<sup>32</sup>

The events that followed during the last two decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century were not at all in favor of the Byzantine Empire, and even less for the emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118). Immediately after taking power, he faced external attacks coming to his empire from the west, namely, from the Normans led by Robert Guiscard. At the same time, the invasions of the Normans on the Arberian lands will give the first news about Polog in the historical annals. The Byzantine chronicler Anna Komnena, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor, provides us with information about these attacks. In her work "*Aleksiada*", she says that after the Normans took Durres at the beginning of 1082, they headed towards other places. At this time Bohemund, the son of Guiscard, took over the war against the emperor, and sent Pjeter, the son of Alipha, and Pantes to conquer the provinces in Macedonia. Immediately in the spring of that year Pjetri of

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<sup>24</sup> Vratislav Zervan, *Local Elites in the Region of Pollog in the Light of the Bogorodica Hretovska Charters*, në : "Power in Landscape, Geographic and Digital Approaches on Historical Research", Leipzig, 2019, f. 326, 328; Ђорђе Бубало, *Влахо Епископ или ВлахоЕпископ*, në: "Зборник радова византолошког института" v. 39, Beograd, 2001/2002, f. 197, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Sipas Millan Shuflait krahas emrave që trashëguan shqiptarët nga kohërat e lashta ilire janë edhe emrat *Barda* dhe *Progon* (Millan Shuflay, *Historia e shqiptarëve të veriut...*, f. 53.)

<sup>26</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 218.

<sup>27</sup> Драган Ташковски, *Самуиловото царство*, Скопје, 1961, f. 73, 141-145.

<sup>28</sup> Стјепан Антолјак, *Средновековна Македонија*, I, Скопје, 1985, f. 446-472.

<sup>29</sup> Qerim Dalipi, *Arbëria midis...*, f. 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 220.

<sup>31</sup> *Историја на македонскиот народ*, I, Скопје, 2000, f. 429-444.

<sup>32</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 214, 222.

Alifa conquered the two Pologs\*, while Puntesi conquered Skopje. The Normans could not keep the acquired territories for a long time, as the recovered army of Alexius I Comnenus, also aided by the locals, began to restore the conquered cities one by one. In 1084, Byzantium managed to re-establish its rule over Durres, and with the death of Robert Guiscard that same year, the last Norman troops withdrew from the Arberian lands.<sup>33</sup>

After a relatively quiet period, according to Anna Komnena, the Polog valley was ruined by the Serbian Župan Vukan in the years 1093-1094. However, the latter could not maintain this region for a long time. The Byzantine emperor immediately undertook an expedition against him and managed to restore power.<sup>34</sup>

Nearly a century later, the process of deepening feudalism within the Byzantine Empire progressed significantly, resulting in the erosion of the central authority wielded by the emperors, marking a trajectory toward decentralization within the empire. Concurrently, the Comnenus dynasty declined, making way for the Angelos dynasty to ascend to the imperial throne, albeit not reaching the previous dynasty's level.<sup>35</sup>

The new emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195) soon took power into his own hands and was forced to face an uprising led by Peter and Asen. After two years of failed attempts to suppress this uprising, Isaac II was forced to recognize the formation of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom headed by Asen in 1187. On the other hand, these circumstances were used quite well by Stefan Nemanja (1169-1196) to become independent from Byzantium.<sup>36</sup> During this crisis that Byzantium was experiencing and taking advantage of the passage of the Third Crusade army through the Balkans to reach Jerusalem, Stefan Nemanja and his army, at the end of 1189 or the beginning of 1190<sup>37</sup>, broke through the upstream of the Vardar River, conquering the city of Skopje, the city of Leshka in Lower Polog, and that of Gradec in Upper Polog.<sup>38</sup>

The upheaval experienced by the Byzantine Empire provided a degree of liberty to the political factors within Arbri. Consequently, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Arberian state was founded, designating Kruja as its capital, and *archon Progon* as its first ruler (1190-1198). Records indicate that he had two sons who succeeded him: Gjini (1198-1208) and Dhimitri (1208-1216). Subsequently, Arbri relinquished its political autonomy.<sup>39</sup>

During the years 1202-1204, significant upheavals unfolded for the Byzantine Empire and the territories under its control, marked by the development of the Fourth Crusade. In this period, rather than heading to battle in Egypt, the crusaders altered their course and seized Constantinople itself. Exploiting the siege of Constantinople by the crusader army in 1203, Bulgarian King Kolojan (1197-1207) extended his dominion from the Sofia Mountains to Thessaloniki, encompassing territories westward such as Prizren, Skopje, Ohrid, Berri, etc.<sup>40</sup> Notably, Pologu also fell under Kolojan's rule, remaining part of the Bulgarian kingdom for several subsequent years.

Indeed, at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Byzantine Empire faced major political changes that led to its temporary disintegration, creating new circumstances that also included the Arberian lands. Consequently, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, several Latin states were created on the ruins of the Byzantine Empire. As the largest state among them was the Latin Empire of the East. In addition to the Latin states, three other Byzantine state formations were formed, such as the Empire of Trebizond, the Empire of Nicaea

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\* Pollogu i Epërm dhe Pollogu i Poshtëm.

<sup>33</sup> *Burime tregimtare...*, f. 103, 104; *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 224, 225; Томо томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 129; *Историја на македонскиот народ*, I, f. 445-449; *Тетово и тетовско низ историјата...*, f. 64-65. Gjerësisht për sulmet e normanëve në Shqipëri dhe Maqedoni, shih: *Burime tregimtare...*, f. 80-127, 136-137.

<sup>34</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 274; *Тетово и тетовско низ историјата...*, f. 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 228

<sup>36</sup> *Историја на македонскиот народ*, I, f. 465.

<sup>37</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 308, 309.

<sup>38</sup> *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, Shkup, 1983, f. 34; Томо томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 129.

<sup>39</sup> Krh.: Aurel Plasari, *Arbni, historik, gjeografik, kishtar dhe politik*, Tiranë, 2020, f. 91-92; Qerim Dalipi, *Arbëria midis...*, f. 24-28.

<sup>40</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 325; *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, f. 35.

and the Despotate of Epirus, which in fact presented themselves as the heirs of Byzantium. These last two were at enmity among themselves as to who should take the primacy.<sup>41</sup>

During the initial decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the political landscape in the Polog valley lacked sustained stability. It intermittently fell under the dominion of different states, each vying for supremacy. In 1224, the armies of Epirus, commanded by the despot Theodore Angelos, seized Thessaloniki and proclaimed him emperor in line with Byzantine tradition. The Despotate of Epirus, with headquarters in Thessalonica, controlled vast territories extending from the Adriatic and Epirus to Thessaly and a significant portion of Macedonia.<sup>42</sup> Its borderline with the Serbian state extended northward from *Arbanum* (medieval Arbri), Dibra and Skopje.<sup>43</sup> From this we learn that during this period the territory of Polog was under the rule of the *basileus and the autocrat of the Romans*. The rule of the Epirotes in Polog was interrupted after the battle of Klokotnica in 1230 when the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan II Asen (1218-1241), managed a victory over the Despotate of Epirus and extended the borders of his state from Adrianople to Durres, or as Acropolis has told the Bulgarian Tsar that he “conquered Albania and looted as far as Illyria”<sup>44</sup> Thus, within the Bulgarian state, Pologu was also included.

Later, the death of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan II Asen in 1241 provided opportunities for the Nicaean army to break through the Balkans. According to historical sources, this empire in 1246 had already separated from Bulgaria all the southern provinces, starting from Adrianople to Vardar. On the other hand, the Despotate of Epirus, after losing its power after the battle of 1230, returned to the Balkan scene and occupied the western part of North Macedonia and Arberia. The Epirotes could keep these territories until 1252-1253, when Mihal II was forced to cede these lands to the emperor of Nicaea.<sup>45</sup> In the following years, these territories remained under the rule of Nicaea, and after 1261, with the renewal of the Byzantine Empire, they entered the latter's administration.<sup>46</sup>

In the early 80s of the 13<sup>th</sup> ct., the Byzantine territories in the Balkans faced persistent incursions by the Serbian monarchs, seeking to expand their control southwards within their realm. These advances culminated under King of Rasha Stefan Urosh II Milutin (1282-1321), who, in 1282, seized the city of Skopje along with Upper and Lower Polog, among other provinces.<sup>47</sup> Within two years, by 1284, he also took control of the Kicevo and Dibra provinces, including their respective cities. Amidst this scenario, the Byzantine emperor Hadronicus II Palaeologus was unable to reclaim these regions, eventually compelled to strike an agreement in 1299 with the Serbian king. This agreement saw the transfer of the occupied territories in North Macedonia to the Serbian kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

During the reign of Stefan Dushan (1331-1355), the Serbian state experienced its greatest expansion. Starting from 1336, through successive campaigns, he managed to conquer the other villages of Arberia. Thus, holding under his rule most of the western provinces of Byzantium, Stefan Dushani was proclaimed emperor in 1346 in Skopje. With the promulgation of the Dushan Code in 1349, in addition to the title of emperor of the Serbs and Greeks, he was also appointed emperor of other subjugated peoples, including the Arbers.<sup>49</sup>

The territories conquered by Stefan Dushan, starting from the Danube to the Gulf of Corinth and the Aegean Sea, or in other words North Macedonia, Arberia, Epirus and Thessaly<sup>50</sup>, remained under the rule of the Serbian emperor until his death in 1355.

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<sup>41</sup> Georg Ostrogoski, *Historia e Perandorisë Bizantine*, Tiranë, 1997, f. 301-309.

<sup>42</sup> Krah.: Georg Ostrogoski, v.c., f. 309; *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 234.

<sup>43</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 337.

<sup>44</sup> Aurel Plasari, *Arbni...*, f. 122; *Историја на македонскиот народ...*, f. 478, 479.

<sup>45</sup> Krah.: Georg Ostrogoski, v.c., f. 313; *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 234, 235; Qerim Dalipi, *Arbëria midis...*, f. 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, f. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 372; Томо томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 129.

<sup>48</sup> *Историја на македонскиот народ*, I, f. 502, 503.

<sup>49</sup> Krah.: *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 275, 276; Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 407-427; *Историја на македонскиот народ*, I, f. 528, 529; Georg Ostrogoski, v.c., f. 369; Aurel Plasari, *Arbni...*, f. 223.

<sup>50</sup> *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, f. 276.

The gift cards of the Serbian kings given to various monasteries, among other things, provide data of interest about the settlements, the economic situation, as well as the main roads that crossed the province of Polog.

### **Routes, settlements and religious facilities**

The first to describe the settlements of Polog region was the Arab chronicler Idriz in his manuscript “*Geography*”. In his travelogue dating back to 1154, he notes that the trip from Ohrid to the Polog\* city required a two-day journey. Furthermore, he details the city as situated atop a hill, adorned with beauty, offering scenic view of the surrounding field.<sup>51</sup> Idriz also delineated the routes traversing Macedonia, including Ohrid-Polog-Skopje and Ohrid-Bitola-Thessaloniki.<sup>52</sup>

Road communication during the Middle Ages was vital for the development of economic-commercial life as well as political-religious communication. The road axes that were inherited from antiquity were not sufficient and most of them led through impassable mountainous places. But, nevertheless, they constituted the basis of the flow of life of the Balkan and Polog peoples, who had access to the main roads of the Balkan Peninsula, that of the north-south and east-west direction. In terms of significance, the north-south road axis was more essential, easier to circulate and was used since the time of the Romans as well as by the Slavic peoples during their invasions of this peninsula. This road begun from the Danube and then through the Morava valley went down to Fushe Kosovo and reached the gorge of Kaçanik, between Sharr mountain and Montenegro, or from the Preshevo mountain pass in Vranje to the upper Vardar valley and through the city of Skopje wound its way to Thessaloniki.<sup>53</sup>

This passage across the Balkans encompassed numerous branches, or regional roads, some of which linked up with Polog and Polog linked to neighboring regions. Within this framework, there were two primary axes of these local roads interconnecting with Polog: 1. the road axis originated from the Vardar valley, traversing along the Lepenc river passing to northwest of Dardania, reaching Bosnia. 2. The more significant axis linked cities such as Durres-Budva-Mitrovica in Kosovo, Skopje-Kostur-Ioannina-Butrint-Durres.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the population of Polog was also connected to the above-mentioned roads through mountain roads also that started from the foot of Mount Sharr, such as the one that ran along the shore of the river Shkumbin (Tetovo) to the crossings over Veshalle and Kobilica, and then headed towards the city of Prizren to join the road axis leading to the coastline; as well as the other route was the local road of Leshka,<sup>55</sup> which extended to the northwest, along the Bistrica river and joined the first road axis.<sup>56</sup> Apart from these roads, there were also other roads in this field, such as the natural highway that stretched along the flow of the Vardar river that passed through the gorge of Derven and Suhodol and continued towards Skopje; the road Ohrid-Kicevo-Polog; Debar-Polog road<sup>57</sup>; road axis in the north-south direction at the foot of Mountain Sharr; and the one at the foot of the Zheden and Suva Gora.<sup>58</sup> All these local and regional roads enabled the local population to communicate internally and externally for economic and cultural purposes.

In addition to the road system, there were also a number of settlements in Polog. The source data of the pre-Ottoman period provide evidence for the presence of over 50 settlements:

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\* Qytet i humbur; nga shumë studiues mendohet se f. Gradec i sotshëm është pasardhës i tij.

<sup>51</sup> Зеќир Рамчиловиќ, *Македонија на делата на арпските и персиските географи на средновековниот период*, нѐ: “Гласник 61”, v.1, 2017, f. 84-89; Томо Томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 145.

<sup>52</sup> *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, f. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Konstandin Jireček, *Historia e serbëve*, I, f. 31; Pikërisht drejtimi veri-jug u përdorë dhe gjatë sundimit serb në Pollog (shek. XIII-XIV).

<sup>54</sup> Apolon Braçe, *Rrugët shqiptare në mesjetë (shek. VII-XV)*, në “Konferenca kombëtare për formimin e popullit shqiptar të gjuhës dhe të kulturës së tij”, Tiranë, 1988, f. 394; Jahja Drançolli, *Raguzanët në Kosovë*, Prishtinë, 1986, f. 35, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Boban Petrovski, *Local roads in Medieval Polog: the Written Sources*, në: “Folia archaeologica Balkanica II”, 2011, Skopje, f. 463.

<sup>56</sup> *Тетово и тетовско низ историјата*, f. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Томо Томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 132-133.

<sup>58</sup> Boban Petrovski, *Local roads in Medieval Polog...*, f. 464. (Për më shumë rreth rrugëve lokale në Pollog shih të njëjtin)

*Leshok, Gradec, Htetova, Banjica, Reçica, Liseci Toçil, Leshkovjan, Nerasht, Radevo, Modriç, Gostivar, Odri, Podbreg, Lashçe, Potoçani, Gjergjevisht, Trebosh, Kerpanja, Pallatica, Hershtani, Gajre, Mllacica, Stençe, Falishte, Leshok, Sallarevo, Zhelino, Brod, Celopek, Vrutok, Banjica, Poroj, Bervenica, Meli, Drenovec, Velgoshte, Brodec, Krajmirovo, Selce, Jedoarce, Izbice, Volkovija, Debresh, Leshnica, Sobri, Ternovo, Jablanca, Krushica, Leshti, Moglica, Nikiforovo, Orashe.*<sup>59</sup> Apart from these, researcher Tomo Tomoski also mentions several cities: a city near *Vratnica, Legen, Sokolec, Castle of Milan.*<sup>60</sup>

During the Serbian rule, the settlements of Polog were included in the administrative unit named Zhupa of Polog. We have the first data about this military-administrative arrangement in the gift card of the Serbian king Milutin issued to the monastery of Saint George in Skopje in the year 1299-1300. With Zhupa of Polog, the *kefalia* governed, which had wide powers: to collect income, arrest people, keep them in prison, judge them, participate in wars, build new cities, etc. During this period, there were several local governors in Polog, who held titles such as: *sevast, prahator, knjaz, vinar, kyr.*<sup>61</sup>

In the property register of the monastery of Saint Mary of Tetova, several local benefactors are mentioned, among them the generous *Pardo Theodri* who also held the Byzantine title of *Kyr*, another *Pardo* and his brother *Teodor*, as well as a certain *Progon.*<sup>62</sup>

Besides the territories possessed by secular feudal lords, during the Serbian reigns of Milutin and Dushan, land in Polog was under the ownership of religious feudal lords, namely monasteries. Throughout the latter half of the 14th century, these monasteries expanded their landholdings through various means, including donations from secular feudal lords or acquisition through purchasing during times of crisis. Such a case happened during the crisis of 1343 when the monastery of Saint Mary of Tetovo bought a field for 20 koblas of grain.<sup>63</sup> We have such evidence in the district of Polog, specifically in the villages of Gjergjevisht and Leshok.<sup>64</sup>

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, three monasteries stood out in the Polog valley due to their wealth: the Gostivar monastery, the Modrich monastery situated between Gradec and Pirok villages, and the Saint Mary of Tetova monastery. These monasteries possessed diverse land properties, encompassing villages with parics, fields, mountains, meadows, and more. Additionally, nearby and distant monasteries also held properties in the Polog area. Starting with the monastery of Saint George in Skopje that possessed the village Recica together with the assets, v. Banica, v. Toçila and a village in Upper Polog, whose name is damaged in the chrysobulla; The Diocese of Prizren had under its possession the church in Potoçan, several properties in Gjergjevisht, the church of Saint Mary of Leshok, as well as church property in v. Trebosh; the monastery of Saint Nicholas of Montenegro in Skopje had v. Nerashte and Radevo; the monastery of Gracanica owned the church of Saint Dimitri in Oder together with its possessions, v. Podbrega as well as property in v. Lashce; the monastery of Saint Mary Prilep owned the place Kerpen near Tetova together with the assets; the monastery of the Archangel in Prizren possessed the village of Sellce together with its assets;<sup>65</sup> through a gift card from Stefan Dushan in 1348 the Hilandari monastery was given the monastery of Saint Mary of Tetova in Polog together with the villages it owned, such as: Jedoarce, Mlacica, half of Zhelino, Htetovo, Herashtan, Drenovec, Brodec, Salarevo, Izbice, Stene and Volkovija.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Iпјјџи, *Полог во средниот век (VI-XIV)*, докторска дисертација, Скопје, 2006, f. 423-497; Vratislav Zervan, v. c., f. 286-349.

<sup>60</sup> Томо томоски, *Македонија низ вековите...*, f. 137-149.

<sup>61</sup> Бобан Петровски, *Локалната власт во средновековната Жупа Полог: претставниците и нивни ингеренци*, Годишен зборник на Филозофски факултет, книга 62, Скопје, 2009, f. 275, 276, 282.

<sup>62</sup> Krah.: Vratislav Zervan, v. c., f. 326.

<sup>63</sup> Vratislav Zervan, v. c., f. 310, 353.

<sup>64</sup> *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, f. 54.

<sup>65</sup> Бобан Петровски, *Полог во средниот век (VI-XIV)...*, f. 410-421.

<sup>66</sup> *Законски споменци...*, f. 422.

The estates of the Church in Polog were maintained through the exploitation of depended people, termed as parics. These individuals, affiliated with either secular or ecclesiastical ranks, were bound to their feudal lord, although some were considered free. Parics also had the capacity to possess personal properties that could be passed down to their children through inheritance.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

The lack of historical sources concerning the Illyrian-Arberian population became the impetus for the Macedonian historiography to deny the continuity of the Illyrian settlements in the North Macedonia, namely the Polog as well, by supporting the thesis that life in these regions was interrupted entirely due to settlement of Slavs. However, the scientific achievements in the field of history prove that the autochthonous population managed to withstand this colonization. Apart from this, linguistic evidence from the field of toponymy such as names of cities: Ulqin-Ulkinion, Nish-Naissus, Shkupi-Scupi, Ohrid-Lyhnis, Durrës-Durrachion, Arta-Arachthos, Shtip-Astribus, etc., Sharr-Scardus mountain, Drin-Drinus river, Vardar-Axios river, serve as indisputable evidence supporting the Illyrian-Arberian continuity of the southern territories which formed the ethno-geographic concept of Medieval Arberia, part of which was Polog as well.

Starting from the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> ct., the Bulgarian state continuously expanded its borders to the west, including the Arberian lands. This state reached its largest expansion during Emperor Samuil's era (976-1014), and it included the region of Polog. With the cessation of the Bulgarian Empire in 1018 by the Byzantine emperor Basil II, the Byzantine administration in Arberia was renewed, in which case the Theme of Skopje was created, under the leadership of the Arberian patrician David Arianit, and Polog was also included in its borders.

The invasions of the Normans on the Arberian lands during the last two decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> ct., will give the first news about Polog in the historical sources evidenced by Ana Komnena. Additionally, a significant source regarding the settlements of Polog is provided by the Arab chronicler Idriz in his manuscript "*Geography*", dated 1154, who, among others, also mentions the city named Polog.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> ct., during the times of great political turmoil, Polog intermittently fell under the rule of Epirotes, Bulgarians and the Empire of Nicaea, until after 1261, with the renewal of the Byzantine Empire, it entered the administration of the latter.

During the Serbian rule (1282-1355), the settlements of Polog were included in the military-administrative unit named Zhupa of Polog. At that time, the noble Arberian *Pardo Theodori*, who held the title of Byzantine Kyr, was also mentioned. Likewise, the gift cards issued to the monasteries by the Serbian kings testify to the continuous presence of the Arberian population in Polog. While in the register of properties of the monastery of Saint Mary of Tetova drawn up around the year 1343, the Albanian anthroponyms *Progon*, *Pardo* are mentioned.

This paper has explored the complex history of Polog, shedding light on its social, political and cultural transformations over the centuries. Through historiographical data, the strategic significance of this region is undoubtedly emphasized, as well as its role as a place of intersection of different cultures. Furthermore, a new and deeper perspective on the history of Polog has been revealed, integrating contemporary sources and revising their previous interpretations. As a result, such an approach enables this study to examine a very important aspect of the history of Polog, specifically the continuity of the Illyrian-Arberian population in this region.

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<sup>67</sup> *Historia e popullit maqedonas*, f. 53.

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