

The Medieval City of Berat and Iconography in the Post-Byzantine Period: a historical overview

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Abstract: The history of cities in the course of centuries represents one of the essential components of people's history. As an epicenter of great social, cultural and economic movements cities have always attracted the attention of the historical sciences's scholars. With a millenia long permanence and a rich and interesting history, Berat represents one of the most prominent examples of the Albanian civilization among centuries. Of course, the study of the years-long history of this city would require a great amount of time and work. A situation this, which surpasses the borders of a monography. For this reason, we are concentrated only in a segment of history, precisely in the features of the ecclesiastical iconographic art of the city of Berat in the XVI – XIX century. The causes which have dictated such a thing are linked even with the existence of a considerably rich documentation regarding this period. Berat, one of the most prominent centers of the Albanian civilization throughout history, is laced in an important geostrategical position. The strong surrounding walls show that the dawn of an authentic settlement began in the IV century BC. Thus this city, founded before 2400 years exactly where Osum valley begins to widen towards the Myzeqe lowland, is distinguished about the uninterrupted continuance of the urban life. Also the city has been and is one the cities which has continuously attracted the attention of different scholars especially those of the byzantine and post-byzantine art. Berat was and remains the greatest Museum in Albania. The city preserves cultural monuments of all genres and centuries. Regarding monuments related to the cult, we find evidence since the early paleochristian constructions, medieval churches and mosques. Taking into consideration these rare and rich cultural values of Berat, I thought to speak about a part of the history of this city, which with the decision of the Council of Ministers, no.172 dt.2/6/1961 was proclaimed a Museum City. Later was compiled the corresponding regulation. In continuance, on 8/7/2008 in the meeting organised by UNESCO in Quebec, Canada, Berat was accepted as world heritage and historical centre.

Keywords: art, icons, frescoes, iconography, Post-byzantine period, culture heritage

INTRODUCTION

The city of Berat (Fig. 1) in the XVI – XIX centuries: an urbanistic overview

The great changes which were manifested in the socio-economic and political life also in the demographic structure of the city of Berat during the XVI – XVII century, defined the new features which were shown in the extension and urbanistic composition of this city during the previously mentioned period. It was the period when Albania as a country already invaded by the Ottoman Empire started to enter the phase of economic development and overall stability.

Based on the detailed recordings of registration concerning the area of Vlorë of the year 1520, the city of Berat counted in total 25 quarters (including the Hebrew community with 25 houses).

Even the urban space of the city in the XVI century was undergoing change. As a result, in the same time

with the socio-economic development, also with the continuous increasing of the urban population during this century, the urban area was greatly expanded and the number of quarters in the city was increased in the end of the XVI century compared with the beginning of this century. The enlargement of the quarters should be understood as an indicator of the intensification of the urban life and a gradual expansion of its urbanistic extension. By the end of the XVI century the city was fastly developing in the area outside the surrounding walls of the fort. Thus the city expansion was being realised in two directions (taking as a starting-point the fort): towards North and Northwest and towards South (including SW and SE).

The variety of the quarters that Berat recorded in the year 1583 convinces you that the urban area was now expanded in more or less stable borders. This is why the new Muslim quarters which began to be created later did not cause big ridemensions in them.

The nomenclature of Berat quarters in the XVI century has the characteristics of an artisan city which was under development. Some quarters had the names of well-known people of the city, from the political, religious or craftsmanship hierarchy etc. It is really significant in this aspect that in the year 1520 existed a special quarter formed by the maintenance and ironworkers and also other quarters with names of craftsmen or priests.

According to the notes of the ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi¹) which belong to the year 1670, the city was organised in 30 quarters, out of which 19 were Muslim, 10 were Christian and 1 Hebrew [3. Çelebi 2000: 49, 50].

Of course the number of the city quarters was inconstant because even the concept about their size and extension was variable. In the documentation of that time are found written down the main quarters as well as derivatives of secondary quarters.



Fig-1: Georges Stockli: Berat city (drawing, 1818),
Mihalarias Art Center, Athens, Greece

Monuments of the Christian Cult

In the city of Berat there was no architectural development in the constructions of the Christian cult during the centuries XVI – XVIII. Beside the old churches constructed in the centuries VII – XV, in Berat were constructed and reconstructed during the centuries XVII – XVIII other churches, some of which are: Saint Theodore, Saint Nicholas, Saint Demetrius, Saint Mary's Assumption cathedral and Saint Spyridon.

¹The real name was Mehmed Zili Ibn Derviş (25.3.1611 – after 1682). He was a high official of the royal court with the duty of inspector (nazir) in order to report about the state of Ottoman provinces. He compiled the work "Travellings" in 10 volumes (*Seyâhatnâme*), where he has also described many Albanian cities (the majority is in the volume VIII). Evliya Çelebi visited Albania twice during the XVII century.

St. Theodore's church (Fig.2) is near the entrance of the Castle. According to the evidences discovered during the restoration, the existing construction is constructed upon the foundations of an old church, around the middle of the XVI century. It is decided upon this date, because in its walls are present fragments of frescoes by the master Onouphrios, where is written the year 1555.



Fig-2: St. Theodore's church

St. Nicholas's church (Fig. 3). The archaeological excavations have discovered that the walls of the church have been constructed in the XVI century. This is proved even by the inscription of the year 1591 which is located in the frescoes of the northern gate. The church has a rectangular plan and is composed by the naos, the alcove of the shrine and threefacet abside. In the church there is a reused capital as a shrine about religious servings, which is an element of the Paleochristian architecture. The church is painted by *Onouphrios Cypriot*²). In the upper part, under the construction of the roof is painted the line of prophets. In the second line are painted evangelical scenes. In the lower line are painted the martyrs and the apostles. In the sides of the church exist two parts of ruined paraclises, one of which hold the name of St. Anastasius and the other that of St. Athanasius.



Fig-3: St. Nicholas church

² A detailed description for this painter to: *The development of art in Berat.*

In the Eastern part of the quarter is **church of St. Demetrius (Fig. 4)**, which is reconstructed by the end of the XVI century and the beginning of the XVII century over the ruins of an old church. The date of the painting is presented over the inscription of the paintings where is written the year 1607. The church represents a low building, situated on the side of one of the longitudinal roads of *Castle* quarter. Throughout time the church has undergone several repairs which can be concretically observed even in the construction and enforcement in the internal of the porch in the Southern part (1774).



Fig-4: Fresco in church of St. Demetrius (1607)

The most important monument of the Christian-orthodox cult in the city of Berat is represented by **St. Mary's Assumption Cathedral (Fig. 5)**. Different from the other churches of this time, the cathedral is distinguished as a building with bigger dimensions. The building has existed for at least, since the XVII century, until Evliya Çelebi in 1670 testifies that in the outer part of Berat castle "*there are 8 churches amongst which, one of them is bigger and more beautiful*" [3. Çelebi 2000: 45]. From the description of the traveller Çelebi, we understand that he is referring to the Cathedral.



Fig-5: St. Mary's Assumption Cathedral

The Cathedral which is preserved even nowadays and is in a relatively good condition, is composed of the

naos together with the alcove of the altar, the other onefloor surroundings in the Northern part and the twofloors surroundings in the Southern part as well as the portico with the arches which are supported by the marble colonnades, brought here from the antique city of Apollonia. Observers from the past, who have visited Berat, have been attracted by the prominent artistic values of the Cathedral's icons, which are thought to have been brought there at an early time from church of Ballsh.

The constructions of the orthodox cult were expanded even in Gorica (*small hill*) quarter. There existed and functioned **Saint Spyridon church (Fig. 6)**. We do not have any information regarding the time of its constructions or other architectural characteristics, except the fact that we are convinced for its existence since at least the XVIII century by the testimony which proves that the church was reconstructed in the year 1864, as it is shown by the inscription at the entrance of the church.



Fig-6A: St. Spyridon church



Fig-6B: Interior of St. Spyridon church

The Albanian Iconographic art

In the Albanian culture, an increasingly high interest is being shown in the Christian-orthodox art of Albania during the Middle Ages until the beginnings of the XX century. The most valuable collection of the Albanian icons is gathered in eremite caves, orthodox churches and monasteries of the thriving Albanian cities and villages and from the collections of the Albanian families. As a historical period, it is easily understood that in these centuries of Christian orthodox art,

appeared many different masters of iconography, special artistic styles, schools or ateliers that are grouped according to time and different areas of Albania.

The iconographic art was born in the early beginnings of Christianity and having to face centuries of persecutions and enriched in researches and difficult dogmatic discussions of the Ecumenical Councils, by passing the test of the iconoclast persecutions, the icon is part of the tradition and of the internal life of the church. In fact, its “strings” are deeply interwoven with the Gospel and the liturgy by having its roots at the depth of religion. Thus, it gains a dimension that transcends the real world.

The Byzantine iconography does not have an absolute originality. In its first steps, you can notice the influence of the Egyptian, Hellenistic, Roman, Syrian, Hebrew art and in the end the medieval western art. These crucial and constructive elements are not used uniformly in all schools of the Byzantine art.

The economic and social structures of these different places, their common religion and the same manner of artistic creativity, guided mainly by the artistic schools of the Constantinople, show that this art was part of that big multinational “family” which would be called the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine art

The beginning of the 4th century AD with Constantine I as emperor of Byzant and the peace he established with the church were the catalyst and the best occasion for the Christians to widely develop their holy art. Under the guide of the bishops, the artists created in the byzantine churches of the capital and of the provinces, monumental iconographic cycles with biblical and liturgical character of an extraordinary importance. In this way they could serve above all to the consolidation of a new religion. In Albania, the artistic evidences of this art are spread into mosaics or frescoes fragments preserved under the ruins of the basilicas in the central and southern part of the country. While the first examples of the created monumental pictures as a fresco technique are found into the eremite caves (century X – XII), where is shown interest in the iconographic originality of the theme they consider and maybe even for artistic qualities of the time and also in the monasteries and churches of the important economic and cultural centres (the frescoes of the Apollonia and Rubik monasteries, church of Vau i Dejës (Deja’s Ford) – Shkodër, St. Mary church in Maligrad island – Korçë, the churches of Berat castle and in other areas). In the same time we find the monumental pictures as part of the kinetic art – ICONS – images in small forms of wooden paintings.

The Byzantine church which reorganised after the iconoclasts (century IX – X) took a liturgical nature. Under the Palaiologoi dynasty, the art got a frenetic development, especially the icons, which were spread in the whole empire and of course even in the Balkans peninsula. After the iconoclasm, the iconographic program of frescoes and icons became more concrete. The liturgical-theological works of the fathers of the church and other authors connected to it became an inspiration. The representing churches of this period for Berat city are: the Holy Trinity (XIII century), St. Mary of Blachernae (XIII century) and St. Michael (XIV century).

Post-Byzantine art

The iconographic program in the Post-Byzantine churches in Albania continued as a momentum of the Byzantine tradition based on the manuals of the Greek paintings. The iconographic artists, obsessed in their main lines continued to create even after the fall of Byzant (1453) initially without making obvious changes. But the influences of the artistic schools of Constantinople, Ohrid, Thessaloniki, and Crete and of the western art would lead to changes that came as a result of the artistic skills and the talent of the iconographic authors. So, the Post-Byzantine period would bring forth the fall of the Byzantine style which was reflected in the iconographic creations of the Orthodox art in the respective places, by reaffirming in this way a new art known as *Post-Byzantinism*. In Albania it was achieved under new political, economic and social circumstances by leaving behind a high level of artistic assets. The inspiration came from Constantinopol, Mount Athos, Ohrid, Crete and the Italian Renaissance. The XVI century marks a qualitative achievement for the Albanian iconography that is related to one of the most important centers of culture and art: the city of Berat.

The development of art in Berat

In the XVI century, the city of Berat was one of the biggest and most developed cities in Albania. As a powerful economic and Episcopal center, it included under its jurisdiction churches and monasteries of the Middle and Southern Albania (Durrës, Vlorë, Himarë, Elbasan and Kastoria, Greece). This powerful city had gathered around itself prominent iconographic artists who worked and created important iconographic works in frescoes and icons. But the most prominent of them was *Onouphrios*, an outstanding painter. Many others after him would create iconographic works of a high quality for around a century, by influencing the later developments of the Post-Byzantine style in Albania. Thus, the Albanian art would be represented in the XVI – XX centuries by anonymous iconographers and painters of the Berat School and the most prominent were: *Onouphrios*, Nicholas (son of *Onouphrios*) and *Onouphrios Cypriot*.

Onouphrios or Onufri (Fig. 7). He was the most outstanding Albanian painter of the XVI century. He created frescoes and icons by advancing into the Palaiologos Art, and he added the realistic and ethnographic elements to this painting style of the XIII – XV century.

Onouphrios has ornamented with his pictures a series of churches in Berat, the province of Shpati, Elbasan, and also in Macedonia and Greece. He started his creative career as a secular, and then he became a priest, and finally a high priest in the city of Elbasan.

The works of Onouphrios have a medieval character, conditioned by topic and approach. He creates different genre scenes on the religious subject and compositionally combines images with architectural setting and with the characteristic background including fields, green wolds and high rocky mountains which are elevated in style.

The frescoes, the large sized icons as Jesus or Saint Mary and also those with small miniature images are distinguished by the insight in the internal world of the images. He equips his images with an idealised noble beauty and with individual features taken from real life. He gives to his paintings ethnographic features of the middle Albania including luxurious clothes covered with jewellery and gold, but also the long shirt outfit with a pair of sleeves, typical of the area of Shpati's Musachia region. With the frescoes, *Onouphrios* created an ensemble with special individual features, with scenes and images interconnected in a composition. *Onouphrios* appears as a master of colours and likes the strong contrast of colours, the flaring red and the shining glimmering gold. He likes the vegetative ornament, but every now and then inserts even the old geometric ornament.

The iconographic work of *Onouphrios* is very wide (frescoes of St. Theodore's church, **Fig. 8**, 1555), Castle, Berat; the icons of iconostasis, the Evangelismos church, Berat; frescoes of the Holy Apostles church, Kastoria (1547), Greece; frescoes of the Saint Prenda (Veneranda) church, Valsh village (1554), Elbasan; frescoes of St. Nicholas church, Shelcan village, Elbasan; etc.). As iconographic works of Onufri we can include the works done in the iconostas of Evangelismos church, Berat where icons of different saints are displayed. After the creation of simple wooden iconostasis (XIV century, Maligrad, Prespa) with a number of great icons, Onufri created for the first time in Albania the post-byzantine iconostas with a full iconographic program with the great icon of church St. Mary and *St. John the Baptist* – as part of the first registration, and the images of the Apostles, characters from the Gospel and other saints as part of the second registration. In the end, as part of a third

registration, we find small icons with the scenes and feasts of Christ and St. Mary.



Fig-7: St. Mary with Christ (Icon on wood).



Fig-8: Fragment of a fresco in St. Theodore's church, Berat (1555)

The scenes of feast icons are massive, but organised in a perfect way in order to serve the biblical theme and the form of creation is special. In the single image icons which he creates for Berat's iconostasis, appear also other qualities of the master where above all is noticed the influence it has upon him the Palaiologos style (1261 – 1453) and the iconographic school of Crete with Venetian influence.

Onouphrios left behind prominent students and followers like his son Nicholas, *Onouphrios* Cypriot and many other anonymous painters in the city of Berat and the province of Shpat, Elbasan's district.

Nicholas of Onouphrios. The son and a follower of *Onouphrios* in the iconographic art. He developed creative activities in the area of frescoes and icons. He worked with the cycle of great feasts, special images of strategist saints, monks and rare subjects, such as the three faced Christ.

Characteristics of Nicholas of *Onouphrios* works are the images with prolonged proportions, differentiated from the portrait, the loose outfits with rolls, decorative colours and the ethnographic element. Nicholas is the author of the paintings in St. Mary of Blachernae Church (Fig. 9), at the Castle of Berat (1579) and of a series of icons of Berat. Also, he has painted the frescoes of churches: St Nicholas in Kurjan, Fier and St. George in Arbanasi, Bulgaria (1561).



Fig-9: Fresco in St. Mary of Blachernae Church (1578)

***Onouphrios* Cypriot (XVI – XVII century).**

He worked in the fields of frescoes and iconography. His thematically wide and iconographically rich work is distinguished by the special colourings, built with the combination of opposite colours, azure and orange, red and green. The way of painting of *Onouphrios* Cypriot corresponds to the traditional way of master *Onouphrios* and especially that of the painter Nicholas. A dark umbra tone covers the area in the part of the flesh, in the face, legs and hands; a pink layer covers it all in a limited amount and is lightened with thin interrupted lines.

Onouphrios Cypriot is known as the author as a series of Berat icons (Fig. 10), frescoes of St. Nicholas church (Fig. 11) and many other works in Argyrokastro (Gjrokastër) county.



Fig-10: St. John the Baptist (Icon on wood, 1599)



Fig-11: Frescoes in the St. Nicholas church (1591)

Epilogue, the development of art in Berat (Fig. 12) in the centuries of the Post-Byzantine period: a panoramic overview. Gradually, in the end of XVI century, the city life in Berat became more vivid and developed. According to Zija Shkodra, a famous scholar, Berat had in the beginning of this century 572 families, and by the year 1570 [i.e. the end of the XVI century / 11. Shkodra 1973: 32] the city had grown larger with 1050 families. This enlargement continued rapidly a century later by holding the first place in Albania as the largest city with 5 thousand houses covered with tiles,... beautiful and adorned like the best places of paradise..., and inside the wall of castle there were 200 houses covered with tiles... [3. Çelebi 2000: 45]. The city continued to function as a *metropolis* [13. Papa 2001: 64]. The number of population grew even more with the demographic movements of 1769, when there were turmoils in the city of Moscopole (Voskopoja) and the villages around. During this time began the investments for the new churches with great dimensions and with inside decorations covered with frescoes and icons. Together with numerous buildings of the Islamic cult, according to Çelebi, *Berati had 30 Islamic shrines...* [3. Çelebi 2000: 50], show that the city thrived economically and socially during the XVII – XIX centuries.

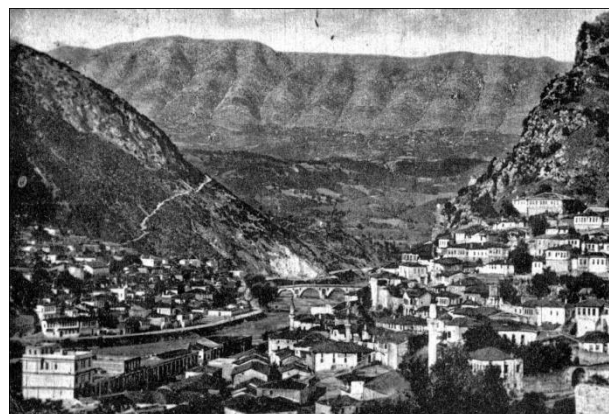


Fig-12: Berat (present day photo)

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, made it difficult for the Byzantine style to survive with its artistic features. The art of the Ottoman Empire with its artistic features influenced everything. This change in the Albanian church art was brought about by *Onouphrios* under the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, which in the XVI century was at its peak. Furthermore in this century, Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror (1432 – 1481) gave to all the inhabitants of the city and to the representative corporation, through a *firman* (royal decree), the freedom of religion, of work and other traditions. Two centuries later (XVII – XVIII) the economic and social stability of the Ottoman Empire led to the building of new churches in the city of Berat with a wide range of artistic creations (icons, frescoes, iconostasis etc.). Even the new painters tried to copy their *master*, but they didn't succeed. Until 1767, the artistic development was also supported by Ohrid Autonomus Archbishopric³). When this institution was abolished, the investments in the artistic activity of the post-byzantine period declined. The fall continued gradually, until in the end of XIX century, there were no more investments.

Ecclesiastical art and the development of iconography sparked not only the creation of Berati School but also that of Korça city (XVIII – XIX century). In the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century, other painters began creating icons based on the Italian style. This tradition continued during the XX century. Zengo family with 11 painters became famous for the iconographic and fresco creations until 1964 [4. Drishti 2000: 161].

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³Until 1767, the Berati Orthodox Metropolitan was in dependence of Ohrid Archbishopric, when the suppression happened. The Berati Metropolitan, in progress, was depended from Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople directly, until 13.9.1922 when an Albanian Orthodox Congress in Berat declared its independence for Albanian Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the decision in 1937.