

**THE ALBANIAN STATE: A CENTURY IN SEARCH OF THE REPATRIATION OF NATIONAL HERO'S (GEORGE CASTRIOT-SKANDERBEG) WEAPONS**



**Art History**

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**Abstract**

One of the questions raised not only by citizens, but also by scholars and historians is: Why state institutions and Albanian governments do not bring the original weapons of our National Hero- George Castriot-Skanderbeg back in Albania? This question was raised again during the celebrations of our 100th Anniversary of Independence, in 2012, when the two original swords and helmet from Vienna were exhibited at the National Historical Museum in Tirana, also during 2018; officially announced as the “Scanderbeg’s Year.” The most frequently asked questions are: Why the most important elements of our historical heritage are far away from Albania? Are Tirana officials and the Albanian governments reminded about Castriot’s weapons only during important anniversaries? Or are we dealing with a wrong perception? A perception perhaps created by the fact that only few have detailed information about the real efforts of Albania’s official institutions, to bring them back to their land of history?

**Introduction**

Let’s say that the general public perception is not too close to the truth. Official efforts to repatriate the symbols of our national hero started a century ago. There is a long correspondence in our archives, with Austria and Italy’s official authorities for this purpose. The earliest correspondence dates back to December 31, 1922 written by the first director of the National Museum to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He found out that a year ago (in 1921), when the then Albanian consul in Austria while staying in Tirana stated, “the Austrian Ministry of Education would donate to the Albanian Museum after being established, with a great pleasure, - two items located in its Museum, - The helmet and sword of our national hero-George Castriot.” With the establishment of the new capital-Tirana, (1920), the new government begun to seriously deal with the identity issues and the establishment of culture and national heritage institutions. After receiving the letter, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Xhaferr Ypi, wrote to Consul Pekmezi in Vienna, in November 4, 1922: “The museum director informed us that while being in Tirana, you told him that Austria’s Ministry of Education would donate George Castriot’s helmet & sword, currently located in the Museum of Austria, to the Albanian state on the day of the Albanian Museum inauguration. Please, confirm if these two relics of particular importance and precious to our nation, can be really donated to us and if so, what formalities must be made in case of an affirmation.”<sup>1</sup>

After two years, in a paper dated 16.7.1924 (Fan Noli was Prime Minister at that time) to the Albanian Consul in Austria, is written: “Several days ago, Mr. Itassler came in the Ministry and told us that in today's spiritual state of Austria's governing circles, there is a possibility that Skanderbeg's weapons, found in the royal treasury or Vienna’s Museum, can be donated to the Albanian Museum. I believe there are three items included: the sword, the helmet and the sword.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, (MFAA), Year 1922, Dossier 167, pages 4, 6.

Firstly, we should be informed about the documents proving these weapons' authenticity. If possible to have copies or a summary of them, please send it to us." Afterwards, two new details were evidenced in the correspondence of 1922. Officially, for the first time, Albania learned that in Vienna were not two, but three elements of our hero's legacy. After that, researches went to a qualitatively different level.

From the verbal information, the Foreign Minister requires from our diplomatic representative in Vienna, to provide complete documents. The purpose was, in case of donation, to make sure they were the original weapons of Skanderbeg and not just their copies. The information received after that, shed light on unknown details of that time. It was firstly learned that the weapons were located in the "Museum of Artistic History" in Vienna. More precisely: "The Helmet in gallery XXV, cabinet II, Nr. 71. The large sword in gallery XXV, cabinet II, Nr. 92. The Small Sword in gallery XXVII, cabinet V, Nr. 345. These items were collected with the initiative and energy of the collector from Tirol, archduke Ferdinand (1529-1595), in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the famous Weapons Museum of Ambras."

The letter continues: "The first news on Skanderbeg's weapons, being also the first historical source about them, is October 15, 1578 in Missiven, Hofkamnersachen 1577/78, pg. 224." Marius Sforca wants to send Skanderbeg and his brother's weapons." For the first time (the weapons) are mentioned in an inventory, printed in 1593, Nr. 69: "the helmet and both Skanderbeg's swords." These weapons are painted for the first time in a book by Jacob Schrenckh de Notzing "Armamentarium heroicum etc. etc". Published in Latin, in 1601, and in German in 1602, at Agricola in Innsbruck. In the painting XXII Skanderbeg is portrayed wearing traditional (Albanian) clothes. The helm is in his right, lying on the ground, (the same as the original helmet in the museum). He holds in his right hand the bare sword (also the same as the original sword in the museum). Near the painting there is also a long life story about Skanderbeg." So, is unknown whether the archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, bought Skanderbeg's weapons in 1578, or if they were sent to him as a gift.

After providing this information, we have another interesting detail, in a letter from Consul Pekmezi. This is an element, not commonly encountered in formal diplomatic papers. After starting the work to accomplish his task, he met with the museum director where the weapons were held. "If the ministry gives me permission, I have hope that I can persuade the director (Dr. Gross) to prepare a long report on Skanderbeg's weapons located in the museum,) in exchange of some small reward.

It is obvious, that sending such a report to our state is very important. "Latter in the paper, one can understand why they recur to "diplomatic bribery" after the Austrians' verbal promise in 1921, to donate us the weapons, as soon as the Historical Museum is established. Albanian state representatives started to realize that the "smiling diplomacy" phase was over. Therefore, Pekmezi ended the letter by saying; "The possibility of donating the weapons located in our museum, seems quite minor. Nevertheless, after thinking and studying it, I composed a plan on how to solve this situation."

The issue goes through complicated labyrinths. The more we thought to be approaching the goal, the further we go from it. This is also apparent in a letter of October 20, 1924 addressed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sulejman Delvina, from the other consul of Albania in Vienna, Mr. Bushati: “A law is needed to bring Skanderbeg's swords and the helmet. The procedure required a long period of time. That is, the time taken for drafting the law. In addition, Austria’s government requires some conditions not mentioned in the paper, for the introduction of this law... i.e. will not be a “gift”, but there will be a reward from our side, as a cordiality and acknowledgment. Mr. Eng. Captain Hubert Hassler (who went in person to the Albanian consulate in Vienna) had presented as an acknowledgment the following relics:

1. A price in gold, equaling the weight of Skanderbeg’s helmet. The helmet weights 2-3 kg, therefore this prize costs around 6000 to 10,000 golden francs.

2. An export concession, for the tobacco outside Albania, or any other concession, to revive again Austrian and Albanian trade relations.”

As you can see, the issue has entered a qualitatively different stage, and is out of discussion that Austria will donate the national hero’s symbols to Albania. In this phase started to take place the philosophy, known in diplomacy as “the stick and carriage”. On one hand, our diplomatic representative was being told “in good faith” that a “special law”, whose procedures may last for years should be adopted to give us the weapons. And on the other hand, to overcome this “barrier” is offered to him as a “personal opinion” the possibility “to weigh them in gold” and to give us a concession, such as that of tobacco. Political parties' approach to important developments within a country is not very different today from a century ago. In one of the correspondences was written: “Mr. Hassler prays to the gentlemen who made the deal, not to release any information of the report outside the ministerial council district, because the issue may not take a favorable course, if the opposing government circles find out about it!”

In these letters is to be emphasized the concern about security conditions and stability in the country, which in the case of a riot could cause Skanderbeg's weapons to end up “in private hands” or in “any other foreign country.” “The Diplomacy of Gifts” is not a new phenomenon; it has been a co-author of the entire history of world diplomacy. One of its elements is also found in the correspondence related to this issue: “About the brochure, written by Custo, to the director Grob, I had an agreement with him, but he did not inform me about the costs of this brochure. In addition to that money, there is a need for a small reward to pay the director for his efforts... ,” concludes the letter.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the negotiations, nor long letters or specifications to the finest details of this matter by the legal, financial, political, diplomatic, and security of a possible war repatriation operation could not change the situation. The year 1924 seems to be the period when perhaps the frequent negotiations are made, so it is seen as the most optimist moment, when Albania could have actually been closer, at least in words, to the realization of the big dream. Ahmet Zogu, who was

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, (MFAA), Year 1924, Dossier 448, pages 5-8, 16-19; 21, 22.

strengthening his political position during this period, personally engaged in this process. The symbols of his kingdom are based on those of the Hero, while the historiography of the time strives to confirm Zogu's deriving from Kastriot blood. In 1928, seemingly powerless to be imposed only through bilateral relations between Albania and Austria, Skanderbeg's weapons recovery efforts "were internationalized", wanting to seek the assistance of other important chancellery of the time. In a letter signed by the Foreign Minister (MFAA, dossier 295/10), Iljas Vrioni writes that "we have the honor to announce that, to enter the procession of Skanderbeg Helmet and Sword located at the Museum of Vienna, this ministry did the proper procedures, through the British and French connections in Albania, from which we have received an answer that both their governments have taken into consideration our request, and will strive to achieve this goal... Please, have the kindness to send the analogue procedures to the Japanese and Belgian Embassies in Paris, based on Article 196 of the Treaty of Saint- Germain."

After two years, on February 21, 1930, there was a desperate attempt to take advantage of an opportunity for the Italians mediations with the Austrians, which seemed virtually impossible, given the route they had previously pursued while arriving in Vienna. In a letter to Foreign Minister Rauf Fico, from the Albanian Legation in Rome (MFAA, Dossier 292/1), is informed about the visit of Austrian Chancellor Shober in Italy, "for signing the Italian-Austrian treaty of friendship" and suggested that he had a possibility to take a personal initiative, with the Federal Chancellor through the mediation of an Italian personality, a friend of Albania, to seek once again, all three, two or even one of the most valuable items of the Albanian nation, found in a Museum of Vienna; Skanderbeg's Helmet and Sword." But, as is quite understandable, all this seems more like a fantasy desire than an opportunity to turn into reality.

The years passed and it seemed that everything was left silent, until six years later another interesting development was noted in this regard. According to Time Books (AMPJ, File 280/7), February 22, 1936, the reopening of the Viennese arms collection was carried out, which was carried by the Art History Museum in the new part of the Palace. There are available 8 large halls and 5 other halls. The collection includes 3,000 objects, being the largest and most valuable collection of its kind in the world. All the weapons are documented from the famous warrior princes from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century." This development seems to have finally sealed the fate of the National Heroes relics, as the efforts would be more and more hopeless. In 1939 Albania was conquered by Italy and Europe became involved in the Second World War. It is understandable that efforts on this issue were cut off. As a comfort, after that, the communist regime managed to bring in an identical copy of Skanderbeg's shop in 1937 in the hands of a prominent Austrian master and copies of his two swords, National in Tirana. However, efforts to restore original weapons did not stop even after the collapse of communism.

In the mid-1990s, the Austrian Parliament refused the Albanian request for their return, using the excuse that the Helmet and two Skanderbeg's Swords went to Vienna through Italy and not through Albania, therefore our country is not considered the country of their origin. This means that, if Italy requires them from Austria and it sends them back, then Albania has the right

to address directly to the official Rome, with a request! This was another high wall that made it even more difficult to turn this wish into reality. But when you have nothing to win, you certainly cannot lose anything else. Therefore, there is another repeated request from Albania, but this time through the city of Kruja, as the headquarters of Skanderbeg's leading and combat activity. Thanking Austria for their preservation, the director of Kruja's "Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu" Museum, Mehdi Hazisi is quoted as saying, "It is time for the Albanian strategist's weapons to be returned to the museum that bears his name in Albania." Maybe we should start as soon as possible a new strategy for their return once and for all, so we will not wait for the 200th anniversary (November 28, 2112) to have them for few days in Tirana! There is a "mythical worship" in Albania for the weapons of our hero.<sup>3</sup>

But the original weapons: the two swords and the helmet are not the only lost heritage objects of our national hero. Chronologically we are also offering some other artifacts for which it was said that they existed and it is unknown where they are currently located.

### The Testament

There is evidence that the most important document signed by Skanderbeg's hand was in Albania until late, but now it seems to be lost without return. A fatal loss, because even if it survived, is in the hands of ... Russians! The news was first made public by N. Nika, the former director of the State Archives. Years ago he had in his hands a document: the unpublished journal of a priest, Pal Dodaj (1880-1951), "the first Albanian provincial superior of the Albanian Franciscan Province." The diary "with personal observations" was identified by Father Zef Pellumbi as an extraordinary story book. There is a note in it: The monastery priest of St. Vladimir (according to a version, Skanderbeg was married there) in the west of Elbasan, during the visit of a Russian archeologist, donated to him George Castriot Skanderbeg's Will. This is believed to have occurred in 1924." Pal Dodaj was arrested on November 8, 1946 and sentenced to death. The sentence was changed into life imprisonment and then he passed away in his cell. According to media reports, Pal Dodaj rescued Zogu from the Austrians, in 1917 by sheltering him at the Rubik Assembly and had correspondence with many well-known people of the time, from At Fishta to Esat Pasha Toptani. The diary is a manuscript in Italian and has little Albanian. It is kept in books

<sup>3</sup> Scanderbeg's weapons Inventory in Vienna:

- The helmet, weights 3 kg, which has a goat's head in its top, worked with white metal, equipped with a gold-plated tape. The goat's head is made of bronze, plated in gold. At the bottom it is surrounded by a copper strip with an inscription of 6 syllables: IM \*PE \*RA \*TO \*RE \*BT, which means: "Jesus of Nazareth blesses you Skanderbeg, Prince of Mati, King of Albania, The terror of Ottomans, King of Epirus." It is believed that they are added later on, considering that along with the titles the value would also grow. The original helmet had the inscription "Lord of Albania."
- The bigger sword, bowed in an arrow shape, weights 3.2 kg, 121 cm long, along with the hilt. Turkish style, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The blade, decorated with ornaments and inscription in Turkish: Libehadur Allah Iskander beg (God's Champion, Skanderbeg). According to Konica, only the blade is original dating from Skanderbeg's era. The silver-plated hilt and the velvet-dressed scabbard date from later. According to historians, he used this sword in the battlefield.
- The short sword is straight, weighs 1.3 kg and has leather scabbard. It is 85.5 cm long and 5.7 cm wide. Two-sided blade and it is gold plated.

#### Chronology of the hero's weapons "pilgrimage"

- Arrival time in Vienna at the Kunthistorisches Museum: 1888
- Departed from: Italy
- Initial owners: The Kastrioti Family. Donika's wife and sons; George and John and his nephew, Scanderbeg junior.
- The second owners: The Duke of Urbino and Arescot
- The third owner: Duke Ferdinand, preserved them in Ambras Castle, in 1605
- The Fourth owner: The Austrian Emperor, at Belvedere Castle 1806
- The fifth and current owner: Kunthistorisches Muzeum, Vienna. Austria.

and notebooks of various formats for the period 1907-1943. In collaboration with Giuseppe Schiro', Pal Dodaj translated the Kanun, published by the Academy of Arts and Sciences, Rome 1941. Although there is no concrete evidence, it seems hard to simply fantasize the loss of the Skanderbeg's Testament with all these credentials.

### **The Correspondence**

There are requests from the Albanian state to other countries, Italy, Austria, etc. in the archives for other relics belonging to our national hero. In an archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAA) of January 22, 1931 it is said: Ettore Migliani, the Chief Intendant of Milan's State Archive, wrote to the Albanian Embassy in Italy, that by means of a Special Convention with Austria in 1920, many valuable documents could be returned to Italy... Among which a letter that Skanderbeg sent to Francesco Sforza on July 18, 1456. He finished the letter saying that there might be other "autographs" on Gjergj Kastrioti in the Archives. The existence of the Skanderbeg's letter in Milan was discovered after Gjergj Pekmezi, from Vienna, had first informed Foreign Minister, Rauf Fico, that he fell in its trace during his search in the Austrian archives to find Scanderbeg's correspondence with Hunyadi, the Hungarian hero. Fico authorizes in October 15, 1930 (MFAA, File 292/17) our Consulate in Vienna to "write to count Hunyadi in Hungary, and ask if in the family's library, inherited from his ancestors, there is any historical note or document"... In another file of the archives of the Foreign Ministry of Albania, (File 292/4) it is found out that "a valuable number of documents related to Albania, have been delivered from the archives of Vienna to Yugoslavia..." Archive's research about Zog's reign period were also conducted for the correspondence between Gjergj Kastriot Skanderbeg and other personalities of the time he lived, including the Vatican and the Pope of Rome.

### **The House in Rome**

Efforts have been made from Albania, in 1925 to buy the house where George Castriot Scanderbeg lived when in Rome. The mission to turn it into a museum of historical memory for the activities and relations of Albanians with the Vatican and Italy, in the period of Skanderbeg and afterwards, did not succeed. In a letter dated April 20, 1925 (MFAA, Dossier 236/1) "On the purchase of Skanderbeg's house" addressed to the Foreign Minister Myfit Libohova, there was also present a decision of the Council of Ministers of that time where was specified the purchase of a house where "Skanderbeg stayed during his last visit in Rome." It is unknown what happened afterwards, but the fact is that Albania does not own such property today.

### **The Albanian Sculpture**

We not only do not have Scanderbeg's original objects he owned while being alive, but also those that embody him in art. One of them, which is historically valuable for the heritage of Albanian culture, is Skanderbeg's bust, realized by the sculptor Murat Toptani (1866-1918). The bust is considered to be the first work in our Renaissance art sculpture and possibly the earliest work performed in this genre for our main hero. After escaping imprisonment from the Ottoman government, the sculptor was briefly settled in Italy and among other Albanians, he sculptured

Scanderbeg's bust, says Prof. F. Hudhri. Murat Toptani, wrote in 1898 that “I sculpted Skanderbeg’s big bust, almost as big as his real size. People here like it, if we prepare forms I will send to you...” While the newspaper “*La Nuova Albania*” wrote that “there are few portraits of the hero that can be admired, but no monument and bust exists. Now we have marbled his figure and we are also pleased to announce that this admirable work is part of an Albanian’s geniality- of Murat Bey Toptani... We can offer you copies in terracotta, very similar to the original... Copies in the original size will be made as well... “It is unknown where the original bust made out of marble is located today, because we have only one photograph that an Italian in Naples sent to Murat Toptani's son in Tirana, with the note: “This is a bust of 1898, worked by Murat Toptani”. Art scholars believe that one of the terracotta copies can certainly be found in Arbëresh families. Created in 1898, this sculpture according to Prof.F.Hudhri is 18 years older than the only sculpture preserved in the Art Gallery from Renaissance period, which is also the work of Murat Toptani, dating back to 1917. Another informal source says that “in the Art Gallery is preserved also the first Albanian bust, which is the bust of Skanderbeg, made in 1908 by Murat Toptani”. The value of Murat Toptani's sculpture (1898) is increased as according to scholars, it is the first and only engraved marble work until 1937 in Albania.

### **The Book of Prayers**

One of the artifacts mentioned to belong to Skanderbeg, is what is considered as his “Book of Prayers,” which is archived at the “*Shelley*” Publishing House in Chelsea, London. For this, perhaps a more accurate verification of the facts is needed, as there is insufficient data. However, there are many artifacts belonging to the National Hero, known or unknown to us, outside the Albanian national territory in the Balkans, which are enough to open another museum, such as that of November 1, 1982, at the Castle of Kruja.

All these and other known, and mostly unknown, artifacts are found in the archives of the Vatican, Italy, Turkey, Austria and Hungary, and perhaps in many other states or private collections that are waiting to be traced, found, discovered, and shed forever to light. Repatriation of all heritage objects of the National Hero has been, is and will forever remain one of the primary tasks of every citizen, every scholar and professional of Albanology and other fields, of every state institution and Albanian government in every time!