

**Some Monuments and old church in Shkodra****Cultural Studies**

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**Abstract**

The history of the Albanian nation contains several gaps due to natural disasters and other fatal occurrences. Several documents from the written archives of the Albanian medieval times are deficient or missing. Those data gaps can be filled only by medieval monuments, works of art which indirectly represent the medieval civilization. The large number of monuments, their artistic quality, and of ten gigantic proportions, show that church architecture was greatly developed in the Illyrian-Albanian lands during the medieval times. Roman Gothic architecture flourished in Northern Albania, due to the continuing close connection of the Northern provinces with the Western churches. The impact of this architecture is also observed in regions temporarily ruled by Westerners. Through centuries, these Christian religious monuments have suffered not only from the devastating natural phenomena, but also from the devastating human interventions. These monuments should not be seen as isolated, amorphous items, but as an organic, and integral part of the cultural tourism and economic development of our country. In this paper, we will address several Christian religious monuments of Shkodra, which represent an exceptional value of our cultural monumental heritage from the medieval times.

**Introduction**

Our monuments of culture have brought up to date evidence of our existence in this territory. They preserve a part of our history, traditions and customs. But, these monuments are now suffering from the devastating effects of natural phenomena, as well as human intervention, and therefore require special attention. Since Shkodra has great potential to become a tourist destination, efforts should be made to achieve that goal. Examples of such monuments are: the castle /town of Gajtan, the castle of Kratuli, cities of Sarda, Drisht and Danja etc.

**The town of Gajtan** (late Bronze age - the beginning of the Iron Age), lies on top of one of the rocky mountains surrounding the Valley of Rrenci, at an altitude of 200 m, about 5 km east of Shkodra. At first glance it gives the impression of the ruins of a pelasgian fortress. (A.Degrad. Shkoder 2001, pg 61). Austrian archaeologist, Praschniker, dates the building of this town around IV century BC. (S.Islami, N.Ceka. Tirane 1965, pg 448). This fortified settlement with its powerful walls represents a step forward in comparison with the previous constructions and marks the beginning of the Iron Age, where social differences had increased compared to the Bronze Age, thus leading to more conflict. To visit this monument of our cultural heritage, it is necessary to build a road.

**The Illyrian fortified residence of Kratuli** is located about 6 km northeast of Shkodra, only 600 meters away from the Bridge of Mesi. It got its name from the hill with the same name, which rises above the village of Boks. This residence, belonging to IV-III century, has an advanced layout achieved by using a primitive technique. (Gj.Karaiskaj. Tiranë 1974, fq 150-154). It is bordered by a protective wall, which closes an ellipse shaped space with a 90-meter large diameter and 45-meter small diameter, basically, an area of less than 1.2 acres. (F.Fistani. Tiranë 1983, pg 110) The surrounding wall is relatively well preserved except for a portion on the west side, which is severely damaged. It is built with large blocks on the sides, while the middle part is covered with medium and small stones. The blocks are of irregular shape, just as they came out of the quarry, and they are set without mortar.

From the typological point of view and the building technique, the fortification of Kratuli is similar to that of Gajtan, however, it presents two particular characteristics that distinguish it from all settlements of this type. The first characteristic is the regular elliptical form of the site plan, which, although it cannot be considered as a deliberate selection of independent configuration of the terrain, is worthy of notice. The second peculiarity is related to the presence of the tower as a fortification element. (S.Islami. Tiranë 1976, pg 102)

**Castle of Shurdhahu-Srada.** Its inhabitants are called ‘Sardiota’ by Ptolemy and "Sardiatoe" by Pliny. (A.Degrad. Tiranë 1976, pg 65) The ruins of the fortress of Shurdhahu are located east of Shkodra, in a strategic location on a hillside over the Drin River and its downstream. The Shurdhahu Castle, with its collapsed walls, its towers as elements of fortification, (D.Komata. Tiranë 1988, pg 367) and church, still standing to this day, was even noticed by scholars who visited northern Albania such as G. von Hahn, (J.G von Hahn. Tiranë 2001, pg 43) A.Degrad, (A.Degrad. Shkodër 2001, pg 65) Th.Ipen etc, who in their records cite the surrounding walls and the ruins of various buildings inside the castle, and the finding of four graves by German archaeologist Trager. (H.Spahiu. Tiranë 1974, pg 182). These particular findings, different from those at the Dalamacia castle, led archaeologists to conclude that this necropolis must have flourished during VI-VIII century AD. (S.Anamali. Tiranë 1971, pg 223).

Another interesting fact is the discovery of some graves near the churches located inside the castle, which belong to the period when Shurdhahu was developing into a city during the XI-XII century. What is also important is the fact that so far there has not been found any evidence that could connect the buildings of this city to the buildings built by the Byzantine administration, rather, it must have been built by local residents during a time when the territory was not under the control of the Byzantine authorities. (H. Spahiu. Tiranë 1974, pg 182).

Shurdhahu or Srada is an example of the phenomenon of the birth of the new medieval towns in Albania, which under new urban conditions, it would continue to flourish up to the start of the XVIII century. (Gj.Karaiskaj. Tiranë 1975, pg 142). In the medieval castle of Shurdhahu- Srada, we find a large number of ruined churches, many of which are known by their original names. They belong to a long period of time, and are related to the Bishopric of Srada, first mentioned in the documents of 1199. (A.Meksi. Tiranë 1984, pg 109) This Bishopric continues to be mentioned in church documents up to the end of the XV century, when it ceases to exist and becomes part of the Bishopric of Sapa. (Idem). There are 11 churches (Gj.Karaiskaj. Tiranë 1975, pg 138) in Shurdhah, some of whose names are the church of Our Lady, church of St. Ndoi, church of St. Paul, church of St. Nicholas, church of St. Todri and church of St. Peter. The best-kept religious building is the Church of Our Lady mounted on the wall of the siege of the city on its eastern edge, above an old church. (A.Meksi. Tiranë 1984, pg 110).

**The Medieval City of Drisht,** built on a hilltop, is located 17 km northeast of Shkodra, in the village of Postribe. It is part of the fortified buildings built at the beginning of the Middle Age years, which were different from the Mid- Albanian fortifications. It is difficult to determine precisely the time when this city was built.

From the prehistoric settlements, the only remaining evidence is a 2 m wide wall, surrounding the top of the hill. (Gj. Karaiskaj. Tiranë 1980, pg 18). Stones are raw, placed one on top of another without any order and without the use of any mortar, creating significant gaps among them. (Gj. Karaiskaj. Tiranë 1974, pg 150). Based on the writing style of an inscription above a tombstone dedicated to Aureliani, a Roman knight, found in this place, we can conclude that this city was established between the I and II century AD. (A. Baçe. Tiranë 1978, pg 51). During the early years of the medieval times, the city plunges into the fog that covers the history of this period, only to come out of it during the IX century, when it is first mentioned as one of the Episcopal headquarters dependent of the Archbishopric of Tivar. (R.Daberdaku. Shkodër 2007, pg 12).

Thanks to Karl Poten, one of the Archbishops of Shkodra, we now know the names of 35 archbishops of Drishti, the latest being elected in 1336. (Th. Ippen. Tiranë 2002, pg 182).

Inside the siege of this medieval city, one can see the remains of tankers, warehouses, and medieval churches such as: The Cathedral of St. Mary (1353), Church of Sancta Maria Veteris (1403), Church of Shëlbueimi (1399), Church of St. George (1400), Church of St. Prenda (1400) and Church of St. Francis (1404). (A.Meksi. Tiranë 2004, pg 142-143). The city was administered by its own Statute "statute et ordinations capituli ecclesiae Chatedralis Drivastum", the manuscript of which is preserved in the Royal Library of Denmark, and is written by Simon Dromasys, notary of Tivar, on January 12, 1468. It is the only cathedral statute among the Albanian coastal cities, which makes it very important to the history of Christianity in Albania. (R.Daberdaku. Shkodër 2007, pg 12). This statute is unique because both the ecclesiastical and secular powers were in the hands of the bishop of the city. The existence of such a statute indicates that Albania had municipal cities, which were organized according to the same model other similar municipal cities of Europe were. On the other hand, the ecclesiastical law was developed based on the local traditions.

Today Drishti can be easily visited since the road has been recently restored, and it is created a suitable environment for the future establishment of a medieval museum.

**Danja** (Dagnum) is mentioned for the first time in historical documents, in 1189. (A.Meksi. Tiranë 2004, pg 243). Danja Castle lies on one of the peaks of a chain of hills that are situated on the left side of the Shkodër- Puka road. The hill rises in the form of a dome and is completely rock-formatted. The Medieval walls of this city surround a very wide territory, but are too damaged and in some places razed to the ground. Danja and Shirqi, were important because of their significant locations above the city of Shkodra. Even the building of the churches was related to the custom trading activity that took place there.

Danja represented the connection that Shkodra had with Zeta, Puka, Mirdita, Kosovo, Dibra, and even Serbia. In 1361, (Idem, pg 189) it is referred to as one of the Episcopal headquarters under the authority of the Archbishop of Tivar. (R Daberdaku. Shkodër 2007, fq 12)

In 1431, the Bishop of Danja, who from 1428 was also the Bishop of Sapa and Sarda, moved to the Abbey of St. Sophia of Genta in Mazrek, as a result of the Turkish invasion. (A.Meksi. Tiranë 2004, pg 71) The church of St. Mary, which belongs to the XIII century, is also related to Danja. Built in the Roman-Gothic style, (W.Kamsi. Shkodër 2000, pg 120) this church can be considered as an architectural achievement. Unfortunately this church does not exist today because it was destroyed.

In addition, there is also the church of St. Mark, which belongs to the XII-XIV century. It is located on top of Mount Deja, by the edge of the eastern wall surrounding the castle of Vau Deja. It is entirely preserved today except for the roof. (Gj.Saraçi. Tiranë 1989, pg 242-249).

These monuments should not be seen just as some amorphous objects, but as an integral part of our cultural tourism, and the economic development of our city. Our society must preserve our national identity, our heritage, and must develop long-term programs to ensure the conservation of these cultural assets. These monuments, as well as others found in Shkodra, should not only be valued as national assets, but as part of the Balkan and European cultural heritage. Cultural monuments are the assets of many generations, hundreds and thousands years old; they are the most prominent products of all times, which help shape our identity in the era of globalization.

The history of the Albanian nation contains several gaps due to natural disasters and other fatal occurrences. Several documents from the written archives of the Albanian medieval times are deficient or missing. Those data gaps can be filled only by medieval monuments, works of art which indirectly represent the medieval civilization. The large number of monuments, their artistic quality, and often gigantic proportions, show that church architecture was greatly developed in the Illyrian-Albanian lands during the medieval times. Roman Gothic architecture flourished in Northern Albania, due to the continuing close connection of the northern provinces with the Western churches. The impact of this architecture is also observed in regions temporarily ruled by Westerners. Through centuries, these Christian religious monuments have suffered not only from the devastating natural phenomena, but also from the devastating human interventions. These monuments should not be seen as isolated, amorphous items, but as an organic, and integral part of the cultural tourism and economic development of our country. In this paper, I will address several Christian religious monuments of Shkodra, which represent an exceptional value of our cultural monumental heritage from the medieval times.

The few, oldest data related to these monuments are found in some historical sources of the medieval times (L. Thalloczy & C. Jeriçek), mainly in the correspondence between the missionaries of the church of Rome and our country's bishops during the XVII century in regards to the state of the provinces they visited over that time frame (I. Zamputi. Tiranë 1963, vol II). The first studies of these constructions were done at the end of the nineteenth century by the Austrian consul of that time in Shkodra, Theodor Ippen, who also wrote many articles about these monuments (Th Ippen. Shkodër 2010.). Besides him, a number of other scholars of this time wrote about these monuments. During the years 1920-1940 of the last century, there have been many publications regarding the location of monuments mentioned in the above documents and the geographic maps of that time (E.Armao. Roma 1933).

Shkodra was first mentioned as an episcopal center of the medieval times at the end of the tenth century in the lists of the emperor Jan Cimiska, first as a subordinate of Durres, and later after 1089, as a subordinate of Tivari (Z.Mirdita. Prizren-Zagreb 1998, pg 160). We have several documents that pertain information about the Medieval churches, starting from the thirteenth century. The oldest monument that appears in these documents is the Church of St.Mary, a church from the year 1288. Other churches found in the Venetian registry of the years 1416-1417 are: St. Stephen, St. Apoloniari, St Cross, St. Mary, St. Nicholas, Saint of Friday, church of all the Saints, and St. Theodore (I.Zamputi. Tiranë 1977, dok 6 ab, 3a, 2a, 6 eb, 18a, 5 ab, 6a). Today, the only preserved church in Shkodra is the cathedral of St. Stephen located in the Castle, which was turned into a mosque immediately after the Turkish conquest of the city, in 1479(H.Hecquard. Tiranë 2008, pg 22).

Since the invasion until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1858), the Turks did not allow any church building in Shkodra, and in time, even the existing ones were lost (Idem). Travelers of that time tell about the location of St. Mary at the foot of the Castle, as well as the location of St. Vlash over which, later, the hammam was built (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, pg 80).

*The ruins of the church of St. Stephen's cathedral* in the fortress represent one of the most valuable monuments of medieval Shkodra. The church consists of the nave, the center of the altar, and the porch on the south side. In the corner of these two, the minaret is attached, an addition made when the church was turned into a mosque. From the examination of the monument in its present state, it is concluded that it was built during three phases. First the altar room was built. The second phase was the building of the porch and the rebuilding of the southern wall of the church. The third stage is when the church was converted into a sanctuary of Islam cult. The simple planned and voluminous construction of the church, the flat walls, the roof coverings of the Naos and cross tiled floors of the altar room, with its single window, are clear evidence of the influence of the Dominican and Franciscan Order on the architecture of the church buildings (Idem).

**The Church of the Monastery of St. Sergius and Baku.** From the very important and historically documented former monastery, today there is only one part of the southern wall of the church remaining, which speaks clearly of the monument's former greatness, as described by travellers and researchers. Today, this church is in the list of the endangered monuments. The earliest mention of it comes from 1166 when the altar of St. Trifoni was ordained in Kotor (Idem). From the names of the old Syrian martyrs from Sergiopolis (Rusafa) we can assume that the church was first built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, under Justinian rule (D. Farlati. *Illiricum Sacrum*. Spalato 1910, vol II, pg 367). The Church of Shirqi proves that Christians of Northern Albania were not converted into orthodox due to the Slavic influence. The presence of the Benedictine monks there excludes this possibility. Another indication of the functioning of this church as a catholic one is the mentioning of this church in 1166 in the documents of the church of Kotor of the Abbot of Peter, a title of the Roman Catholic church (Z.Mirdita. *Prizren-Zagreb* 1998, pg 357). This monastery along with other monasteries that were dedicated to St. Benedict, such as: Shëlbuemi (Rubik), St. Lleshi (in Oros), St. Mary of Nderfanda, and St. Nicholas in Mat, served as live connections to the Roman Church. Several travelers' accounts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century inform us of the architectural value and the actual condition of this church at the time. Marin Bici in 1611, (I.Zamputi. *Tiranë* 1963, pg 103) is the first to write about the damages the paintings of the church had sustained, "the church had a great structure, could hold 3000 people inside, and was decorated with paintings of saints whose eyes had been damaged from the turks." The Bishop of Shkodra, D. Andreasi, who visited the church in 1623 tells us, "the abbey church of St. Sergius is standing, but the bell tower is a wreck. The building of the church is beautiful, but it resembles a thieves' cave ", ie an abandoned place. Later, in 1629, B.Orsini also mentions it as a cathedral abbey (Idem). Considering the actual fragile condition of this it is imperative that we immediately start working on restoring this valuable monument of our national culture.

**In the ancient city of Drishti (Drivastum -in)**, several churches were documented such as: St. Mary's Cathedral (1353), Sancta Maria Vetus (1403), Shëlbuemi (1399), St. George (1400), St. 's Friday (1400) and St. Francis (1404), (A.Meksi. *Tiranë* 1983, pg 85). Today in this locality are the ruins of two churches ; the three-towered chapel in the castle and a church Nefesh to climb to the castle. The three-towered Church, for which the first Th. Ippen speaks, rises separately on a rocky slope inside the castle, near the surrounding walls in the east side. It is a chapel whose walls are preserved to a height of 1.5-2m. The walls are built with raw limestone set in horizontal rows connected with lime mortar and fine sand, showing only a thin line on the outside. On the east side, there is a circular niche located in the corners of the eastern wall and a niche in the south. The three walls of the apse are not well preserved to allow us to see the base of the concave and for the same reason one can not define the former church's roof top, whether it was a dome or a wooden roof.Regarding the time of construction of the church, based on the blueprint and the wall construction techniques, we think it belongs to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century (Idem).

**Church of St. John in Rrashkullë.** This is the ancient Benedictine Abbey of St John in Rrash Kullaj, Vrakë, in the zone of Malesia e Madhe, an area about 1 hectar of land, which includes the ruins of the church, the bell tower and the surrounding wall. The earliest mention of this church belongs to the year 1166, in a historic document referring to the abbot of the monastery of St. Gini (San Giobani in Strilaleo), (Idem). Later on October 26, 1356 in a letter from Pope Innocent VI sent from Avignon to the bishop of Balleci (M. Shuflaj. *Prishtinë* 1968, pg 153), the church is mentioned as a Benedictine monastery, "*Andree episcopo Balazensi monasterium S.Johannis ordinis S.Benedicti Drivastensis diocesis in Regno Rassie..*".

This important document is an assertion that this assembly, which was later disassembled, was a Benedictine monastery ruled by the diocese of Drishti and of the the spread of the schismatic fanaticism in the northern of Albania. This assembly, however, was quickly reinstated and 20 years later it was still ruled by the diocese of Drishti (A.Meksi. *Tiranë* 1983, pg 86). Marin Bolica was the first to write about this monument in 1614 (I. Zamputi. *Tiranë* 1977, pg 261) followed later by Benedict Orsini in 1628 (Idem).

Based on his testimony, the beautiful and masterfully built church was burned by the Turks. He also speaks about the bell tower built with a variety of marble stones. The church had a prolonged rectangular layout. By the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the north and southwestern corners were still preserved to a certain height, while today the middle of the eastern part is the better preserved portion of the wall (M. Shuflaj. Tiranë 2001, pg 187). Based on the historical documentation, this wall was built during the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

***St. Mark's Church in the castle of Danja.*** This church is located on top of Mount Deja next to the eastern edge of the wall surrounding the castle of Vau Deja, the former town of Danja. The church was first mentioned in historical documents of the year 1400 (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, pg 88). Several travelers' accounts confirm that. Gjergj Bardhi, on his account regarding his visit to the church during the year 1631-32, tells us that "the church is lately renovated and covered under our care". The monument is completely preserved except for the roof. Its layout consists of an extended rectangle with a circular apse on the east side. The building has undergone several reconstructions in time, which can be generally distinguished by differences in construction techniques. Regarding the dating of the church's construction, it is believed to belong to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century since it is mentioned at the end of that period.

***Monastery of St. Sophia of Genta in Mazrek.*** The ruins of this monastery, as known from written documentation, are located in the center of the village of Mazrek where it was known as "Church of Shati" in a land that is used today as the village cemetery. The first to share information about this church is again Theodor Ippen, in whose writing he describes a large church with a bell tower, a chapel and the ruins of a building. From the present state of the ruins, one can conclude that this was a two storey building with thick walls of unshaped stones on the inside and squared stones on the outside. Only the northeastern and southwestern corners of the church's walls are preserved. In other parts, the walls can barely be found. Archeological excavation is needed to determine the overall picture of the church as well as an older stage of it. On its ground floor, there are three entrances, respectively in the northern, western, and eastern sides. The first two are broad entrances that extend into the interior, while the entrance on the eastern side consists of a threshold and a staircase leading to it. Of specific interest are the object in the lower part of the right entrance; a stone lion in the a traditional pose with its tail up, but with a horse's head, and a stone fragment of a part of ponytail with triple band dated from the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries (A. Meksi. Tiranë 2004, pg 172). These ruins identify with the monastery of "Sancta Sophia of Genta" of the diocese of Sardis (Idem) (Shurdhahu) mentioned in the documents of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. This monastery, built in the fourteenth century, must have been an important center since its abbot are mentioned each time the bishops of Sardis were appointed.

So obviously there are a number of churches in Shkodra that need renovation due to their fragile condition. Their poor structural condition and the transformations made over the centuries, have made it necessary for us to intervene and restore these monuments to their historical glory. The study and renovation of these monuments should be seen in a broader way because of their similar damages and renovation needs which could be resolved in the same way. The government, through its specific institutions, must intervene as soon as possible and not leave these important monuments of our cultural heritage to the mercy of fate, because they need protection and restoration.

I think that there should be a committee of historians, scholars, architects, restorers and specialists of church to start working for the salvation of these objects of great importance to our national culture.

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