The Social-Legal Rights and Political Activity of Albanian Women in the Late Middle Ages (Thirteenth–Fifteenth Centuries)

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses women’s legal status in urban areas in Albania during the late Middle Ages, particularly Shkodra, Durrës, Ulqini, Tivari, and others. The documentary sources of the time reveal the role and importance of women, and shed light on the legal and penal protection of her person, dignity, and honor. In cases of murder, assault, insult, violence, and rape against women, no individual, neither layperson nor clergy, had immunity from prosecution before the law. This article also addresses the political influence of Albanian noblewomen during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as well as their privileges and rights to emigrate, mainly to the Republic of Venice and southern Italy, after the final Ottoman conquest of Albanian territories.

KEYWORDS: civic municipality, legal statutes, Medieval Albania, social rights, women

Introduction

The condition and status of Albanian women have attracted the attention of Albanologists and foreign scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day. More recently, Albanian scholars across disciplines have explored the position of Albanian women in the Ottoman era and during the twentieth century. Yet within this research, the women of medieval Albania have generally not been the direct subject of inquiry. This article is based on a wide range of Byzantine documentary sources that deal with the history of medieval Albania (seventh–fifteenth centuries), the Statutes of Shkodra, documents regarding the history of Albania during the fifteenth century (1400–1405; 1406–1410; and 1479–1506), as well as the Cadastre and Concessions Register for the district of Shkodra 1416–1417 and the Chronicle of John (Gjon) Musachi. These
sources reveal that elite medieval Albanian women enjoyed autonomy over their daily lives and, frequently, the ability to assert their authority.

Any treatment of the history of Albania in the Middle Ages must begin with the clarification of the terms “Albania” (in Greek: Albanos, Arbanites; in Latin: Arbanum, Albanum; in Serbian: Raban) and “Albanensis” (Albanian) (in Greek: Albanos, Arbanites; in Italian: Albanese; in Serbian: Arbanas), as in the documentary sources of the time they embody different meanings. Albania in the Middle Ages was not a politically unified state and, as it was caught between the Ottoman empire and the spreading influence of the Republic of Venice, there was no explicitly independent Albanian culture. For this reason, the terms “Albania” and “Albanian” in medieval times were more geographical rather than ethnic concepts.

Medieval Albania had two main types of towns: Byzantine-type towns and Italo-Dalmatian-type towns, which reflected the different paths of development of the Latin and Greek worlds after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Byzantine-type towns prevailed in southern Albania, such as Vlora, Berat, and others, characterized by the lack of a civic constitution (statutes); this type of Byzantine town was not organized as a municipality (commune—self-governing town). In contrast, Italo-Dalmatian-type towns dominated in northern coastal Albania and had a tradition of autonomy in self-government based on statutes according to the model of northern Italy. The highest expression of the municipal organization of northern Albanian towns at the beginning of the late Middle Ages were the town statutes, which summarized the normative acts that regulated the organization and functioning of the town, as well as the relationships between citizens, between citizens and the state, and between the town itself and the surrounding environment.

From the historical data it appears that during the fourteenth century, statutes were established in most Albanian towns of the southeast Adriatic coast, such as Durrës (1392), Shkodra, Drishti (1397), Ulqini (1376), and Tivari (1369). From the beginning of the thirteenth century until 1355, these towns were under the rule of the Serbian Nemanjić dynasty and had the right to self-government on the basis of their statutes. The power of the Kingdom of Serbia in these municipalities was represented by the “Count.” The “Count” had to respect the self-government of the municipalities, but at the same time he received half the value of the fines provided for in the statutes. The right to self-government based on the statutes was preserved by the municipalities even during the rule of Thopia (Durrës, 1355–1392) and the Balšić dynasties (Shkodra, Drishti, Ulqini, and Tivari, 1355–1396), as well as when these towns came under the Venetian protectorate (1392–1479).

The statutes of medieval Albanian towns contained a strong European spirit. From their first chapter they embodied the well-known principle of Western European medieval civilization that “Stadtluft macht frei” (urban air makes you free), proclaimed for the first time in the city of Goslar on 13 July 1219 by the Holy Roman Emperor of the German nation, Frederick II Hohenstaufen. In fact, the first chapter sanctioned the right to asylum and protection to any person who entered the Albanian municipalities in order to escape the persecution of feudal power. This is not, however, the only chapter reminiscent of modern documents on human rights and freedoms. Within the
Statutes, such freedoms and rights were sanctioned in a series of legal entries dealing with the right to life, property, inheritance, protection, and to vote and be elected—even the right to privacy. The statutes gave special protection to the most vulnerable elements of society, including women, children, and the elderly.

The development of northern coastal Albanian towns during the late Middle Ages occurred in connection with high rates of population growth. Towns constantly attracted new residents from rural areas. The newcomers brought benefits in various fields of commercial and handicraft economics. In addition, the population expanded as nobles (feudal lords) from the countryside moved permanently or spent a good part of their time in the towns to pursue their economic interests or to enjoy the pleasures that civic life offered. Many of them owned properties, warehouses, and even homes in the towns. In time, these representatives of the landed aristocracy integrated into town life, undertook various economic activities, gained citizen status, and were often included in municipal governing bodies.

The inhabitants of the towns with the status of citizen (civis)\(^{19}\) were divided into nobles (nobiles) and commoners (popolares).\(^{20}\) The nobles included the king’s deputy, the count, the senior governors and municipal officials, army and militia commanders, large entrepreneurs (masters) of various economic spheres, merchants, and large landowners. Usually their homes were located in the highest and most protected part of the town. The popolares included ordinary craftsmen and merchants, city guards, farmers, agricultural and livestock workers, and manual laborers in general.\(^{21}\) Towns also had a category for inhabitants, mostly newcomers from the villages, who had not yet acquired the right of citizenship. These, for sure, were excluded from a number of rights and from participation in the political and social activities of the towns. In addition to local citizens with full rights, who participated without restriction in the economic, social, and political life of the towns, the statutes also mentioned foreign residents, mainly Slavs and Latins, who were exempt from municipal duties for one year.\(^{22}\) The economic organization of these towns was based on trade, handicrafts, and agriculture. Each town had its own coin, stamp, units of measure, and units of weight. The coins were usually made of bronze and depicted the saint of the town on one side and the name of the municipality on the other. These elements reflect the high level of autonomous development of the coastal municipalities of northern Albania in the Middle Ages.

The Social-Legal Rights of Women in the Towns of Northwest Albania

Documentary sources provide relatively abundant information regarding the role and importance of women in the municipal towns self-governed by statutes, such as Durrës, Shkodra, Drisht (Drivasto), Ulqini, and Tivari. Byzantine sources from the early–mid-thirteenth century document a woman’s right to seek a divorce,\(^{23}\) to be a custodian of property, to draft a will,\(^{24}\) as well as other notarial acts.\(^{25}\) For example, a letter by the Archbishop of Ohrid, Demetrius (Dhimitër) Homatjanoj,\(^{26}\) dated May 1223, mentions “one Kabasilina, who lived in the castle of Durrës, writing a will without the presence of her sons and without naming the aforementioned [sons] in her
will.”

In addition, the Statutes of Shkodra reflect for the northwestern Adriatic area the archetype of the role and importance of women in society. Criminal sanctions against immorality occupied a special place in the Statutes, demonstrating the legal and penal protection of the person, dignity, and honor of women. The law was very sensitive regarding a woman’s denunciation of insults and physical or sexual violence made against her person. Punishment was severe regardless of rank or status, and did not distinguish between secular and clerical persons. The legal framework in the statutes conceived of various situations and combinations, suggesting that respect for the rights of women and the protection of their dignity in that period could be considered de jure genuine. For example, if a married woman complained of rape, beating, or robbery by a clergyman, then she should be trusted even without witnesses and could receive compensation. Statutory norms also provided for cases in which a man raped an unmarried maiden. If the man was also unmarried, then he was forced to marry her. If both the man and woman were married, then he was punished with a fine of fifty hyperpyron, which were divided between the count and the offended woman. However, unlike the first case, in which the woman was believed even without witnesses, in this situation she had to give convincing evidence. It should be noted that in medieval Albania women were protected because a violation of their honor was also a violation of their family’s honor or their husband’s honor, so protections for women were really maintaining hierarchies and privileges in society. Current documentary sources do not adequately or explicitly suggest that women were valued in their own right or that they had greater rights beyond as property, honor, or status.

Nevertheless, in coastal Albanian towns (Durrës, Lezha, Shkodra, Drisht, Ulqini, Tivari) under the administration of the Republic of San Marco (1392–1479), following the statutes, rules, and customs of the Venetian governing authorities sometimes caused discontent among the local population. In the municipalities of Durrës and Drisht, for instance, local Venetian foreign governors abused and trampled the most basic moral norms against local women, threatening and coercing them to give false testimony as well as attempting rape.

Husbands generally had to show respect for their wives and were not to abandon them because of a lack of dowry or meager wealth. A wife’s dowry was not to be transferred to the husband or spent by him, in order to protect the wife’s property rights. Neither was he allowed to use his wife’s dowry to pay blood money (urazba in medieval Serbian): “No man is allowed to take anything from his wife’s dowry to pay off a blood feud or urazba. The municipality should come to the defense of the woman, while the man who commits such a foolish act should pay for it out of his own pocket.”

According to the statutes, a husband and wife should have reciprocal relationships between them, something that was reflected in the acquisition of each other’s property and wealth as inheritance when one of them passed away. The wife had the right to withhold her part from her parents-in-law, and also the right to write a will: “Girls and women generally have the right to issue a will, starting at the age of twelve and above.” Parallel to those of Shkodra and Durrës, a woman’s right to file a lawsuit,
draft a will, inherit property, write a power of attorney, have legal representatives for various issues related to her property, and be the executor of a will is also evident in the archival documents of Dubrovnik (Državni u Dubrovniku) of the early fifteenth century, as well as in those of other coastal cities of Albania, such as Ulqini and Tivari. Venetian documentary sources also reveal that women who owned property and wealth had the right to administer, gift, or sell their property according to various economic interests.

In the “Cadastre of Shkodra and the Register of Concessions of 1416–1417,” compiled by the Venetian administration for properties owned by the “Queen of the Adriatic” in Albanian lands and for the fiscal system for inhabitants under her authority, the term “women’s rights” is often mentioned in connection with land holdings owned by various women, including widows, in the city of Shkodra and its surrounding area. In general, the women of Shkodra of the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries enjoyed a status that would be coveted by their descendants in later centuries. According to the Statutes, family property was equally owned: “Everything that man and woman gain together is considered equal, i.e., half belongs to the man and half to the woman.”

The protection of the moral integrity and property rights of women in the Statutes of Shkodra testify to some extent to the respect of a woman’s personhood and offer one of the main indicators of the development and emancipation of civil society in Shkodra and in the other coastal municipalities of Albania in the late Middle Ages.

Power Politics and Noble Women in Late Medieval Albania

In addition to the Statutes of Shkodra, which testify to the sociolegal rights of women, some chronicles provide partial evidence of the political power of Albanian noble women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Marriages and betrothals between dynasties in medieval Europe were, first and foremost, political acts by which alliances with neighbors were strengthened, a principality’s territory expanded, and its influence increased. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, family and political alliances were made between almost all the aristocratic families. There were also dynastic marriages and family alliances between Albanian and foreign nobility, mainly from the surrounding regions and the opposite Adriatic coast. In this way, the Albanian nobility were integrated into the larger regional nobility network. Without a doubt, aristocratic women, whether foreign or indigenous, played a significant role in these interdynastic marriages, betrothals, and family alliances characteristic of Medieval Europe as a whole (including the Balkan area), whose sociopolitical protagonism left its mark on history—not only of the surrounding region, but also on both sides of the Adriatic.

Sometimes, religious sentiment played a role in shaping the dynastic choices of elite Albanian families. One example can be seen in the marital unions between the Serbian Nemanjić dynasty and the French house of Anjou, apparent from 1250 onward, when Stefan Uroš I (r. 1243–1276) married the French princess Helen of Anjou, who “was praised for her sharp speech, kindness, generosity, and her piety.” That the administration of the Catholic enclaves of the Kingdom of Serbia, beginning with
Doclea (Zeta, Montenegro), came under his direct care was not without cause: “The devout Helen has founded Franciscan monasteries in front of the ports of Tivari and Kotor.” Evidence shows that she ruled these regions until her death in 1314, while her sister Maria de Chaurs ruled Ulqini from 1283, when she appears with the title Domina Ulcinii (Lord of Ulqini): “Maria, the sister of queen Helena, was married to Anselm de Chaurs who in 1273 is mentioned in Arbanon as the general captain of Charles I of Albania. Maria lived as a widow (from the year 1281) in her sister’s land where she was given a residence in Ulqini.” Indeed, a significant number of civic municipalities of the East Adriatic coast with large Catholic populations, such as Tivari, Ulqini, and Shkodra, enjoyed the autonomy of self-government and municipal self-organization, while at the same time respecting the sovereign right of the Serbian royal crown.

In addition to their preservation of Catholicism, Albanian noblewomen made significant political and diplomatic efforts to protect their principalities from Ottoman invasion. This was the case in the efforts of Comnena Balšić with the Venetians before May 1386, when an Ottoman expedition was expected against Vlora, led by Sultan Murad I himself. Comnena Balšić, the eldest daughter of despot Andrea II Musachi, ruled Kanina and Vlora and all their surroundings. Comnena married Balša II (the third son of Balša I, founder of the Balšić dynasty (d. 1367)) in 1372 and thanks to this marriage, Balša II took possession of Vlora and Kanina. Balša II died in the Battle of Savra on 18 September 1385 against the troops of Charles Thopia, who had formed an alliance with the Ottomans, leaving his widow in possession of the throne. According to medievalist P. Xhufi, in May 1386 the Republic of Venice presented a proposal to Comnena that Kanina and Vlora be handed over unconditionally to the Venetian government to save them from Ottoman incursions. In addition, the Senate of the Republic of Venice warned Venetian citizens that none of them should marry Lady Comnena Balšić of Vlora or her daughter, otherwise they would be subject to a severe prison sentence. This decision proved explicitly that the Signoria wanted Vlora and Kanina for itself, by not encouraging a joint Albanian–Venetian government in the territory in question, which could implicate the “Queen of the Adriatic” in the problematic relations that the female ruler of Vlora had with the Ottomans.

Comnena Balšić initiated a series of protracted treaties with Venice on the issue of her possessions in February and June 1389, in which she made an extreme proposal, expressing her readiness, on certain conditions, to leave Vlora and the castle of Kanina to the Venetian Signoria. Once again, however, the Venetian authorities refused Comnena’s proposal, as, in reality, Corfu, Butrint, and, later on, Durrës (1392) would be sufficient for the Signoria to secure its territory in the lower Adriatic and northern Ionian sea. The last negotiation of Comnena Balšić with the Venetians occurred in autumn 1395, when she sent a delegation to Venice to present her proposals. Under intense pressure from the Ottomans and in poor health, Comnena proposed the delivery of Vlora, Kanina, and Pirgo, from which nine thousand gold ducats per year were obtained, against an annual provision of seven thousand ducats, as long as Comnena and her daughter were alive. Even this proposal was not taken into consideration at all by the Republic of Venice.

In September 1396, Mrkša Žarković (1396–1414) is mentioned as being the ruler of Vlora and Kanina. Žarković was the son of the nobleman and ruler (Gospodin)
of Zeta, Žarko (1336–before 1371) and Tedodora Dejanović, the daughter of Baša II and Comnena (Musachi-Bašić), who ruled these territories until 1417 (even after the death of her husband in 1414). Mrša’s marriage to Ruđina in 1391 reconsolidated the ties between the rulers of Vlora and Zeta, which had been severed after the death of Baša II in the Battle of Savra. Furthermore, in 1394, the marriage between these two families was authorized by the Holy Synod of Constantinople, due to the kinship that the couple had: after 1371, Mrša’s mother, Theodora (a Serbian noblewoman from the Dejanović family), had entered into a second marriage with Đurađ I Bašić (1362–1378), who was Ruđina’s uncle.

Unlike other principalities of Medieval Albania, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Vlora was ruled by female descendants of the Bašić dynasty. Ruđina Bašić, the only Lady of Vlora after the death of her husband Mrša in 1414, under the pressure of a serious Ottoman threat, and with the humility expected from a female ruler, continued to negotiate with Venice for help and the protection of her territory, just as her mother, Comnena Bašić, had done in the past. The efforts of Ruđina Bašić’s envoy in February 1415 and December 1416 in the Republic of St. Mark once again fell on deaf ears and the indifferent and disinterested attitude of the Venetian governmental authorities. When Ottoman commander Hamza bey Evrenoz conquered Berat, Kanina, and Vlora in June 1417, Rudina Balšić together with her family and court moved first to Corfu, and then in 1421 to Ragusa. Ruđina Bašić is not mentioned in historical sources after 1421.

The female leadership tradition of the Bašić family continued with Evdokia Balšić, the daughter of Đurađ I Bašić (Ruđina Balšić’s uncle) and Theodora. Around the year 1402, in the city of Vlora (where her brother ruled), Evdokia married the Italian despot of Ioannina, Esau de’ Buondelmonti Acciaiuoli (r. 1385–1411), after he divorced his second wife Irena Shpata, the sister of John (Gjon) Shpata, the ruler of Arta and its surroundings (1359–1399). Evdokia Balšić’s marriage is mentioned in a document from Ragusa dated 11 and 14 July 1402, in which the Council of Ragusa decided to send a gift of 100 hyperpyron to Mrša’s sister and offer a Ragusian military ship to escort her to her husband. After the death of her husband in 1411, Evdokia Balšić tried to govern Ioannina alone. She opposed efforts by some city leaders to hand the city over to the nephew of the despot Esau, the count of Cephalonia, Carlo I Tocco. Supported mainly by the lower and middle classes of the city, the “Lady Despot of Albania” entered into negotiations with John Zenevisi, an Albanian magnate who held estates in Epirus, such as Gjirokastra and Vagenetia. This encouraged the supporters of Carlo I Tocco to organize a conspiracy that forced Lady Evdokia and her sons to flee the city and take temporary shelter with John (Gjon) Zenevisi in Gjirokastra.

In 1427, Evdokia and her two sons were in Ragusa. The “Lady Despot of Albania” was now around sixty years old, and her presence in Ragusa seems to have been a cause for concern for the city authorities. Evdokia claimed property from the Bašić possessions, over which there had already been a serious clash between Venice and Serbia—with whom Ragusa had problematic relations. For this reason, the Ragusan government ensured that Evdokia Bašić and her sons left Ragusa under guard and protected. A year later (1428), the Great Council of Ragusa granted permission
for Evdokia to be resituated in the city of Modon\textsuperscript{89} (Methoni—in the southwestern Peloponnese).

Another important protagonist in the political life of central Albania during the late Middle Ages was Helena Thopia (1388–1402/1403), the daughter of Charles (Karl) Thopia (1359–1388).\textsuperscript{90} Upon her father’s death, she inherited part of the principality of the Thopia family and became the ruler of Kruja and the surrounding region, together with her husband, Venetian nobleman Marco Barbadigo.\textsuperscript{91} According to an agreement of 28 August 1393, Venice persuaded Helena Thopia and Marco Barbadigo to rule Kruja in the name of the Signoria as its vassal.\textsuperscript{92} A year later (1394), the Thopia–Barbadigo couple made an alliance with the Ottomans and became a vassal of Sultan Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402), which displeased the Venetians.\textsuperscript{93} With the approval of the Ottomans, Barbadigo tried to occupy all the territories up to the outskirts of Durrës, and incited the local population to revolt against the Venetian authorities.\textsuperscript{94} Under these conditions, on 6 September 1394, the Republic of San Marco occupied Kruja and arrested Barbadigo and Helena Thopia, who according to the Venetians encouraged her husband’s political position.\textsuperscript{95} According to Milan Šuffl  ay, on 14 February 1395, Konstantin Balšić (the son of Durad I Balšić and Theodora Dejanović), the second husband of Helena Thopia, had taken over Kruja as an Ottoman vassal. He became the lord of the entire province of Skuria near Durrës, and in 1401 he became an honorary citizen of Venice together with his wife and children. But he had not given up his old plans for the conquest of Durrës, even if it required the help of the Turks. His efforts ended sometime before 22 October 1402, when he was arrested and tried in Durrës, and his mother Theodora and wife Helena were sent to Venice.\textsuperscript{96} The Venetian authorities found Helena Thopia innocent, and returned her previously confiscated riches.\textsuperscript{97} But, in 1403, Count Niketa Thopia took the castle of Kruja from his cousin Helena, ending her rule.\textsuperscript{98}

The most important woman in medieval Albanian political life, however, was Andronika Comneniates (the eldest daughter of Arian Comnenus, also known as George Arianiti, and Maria Musachi), better known as Donika Kastrioti, the wife of George Castriotta Skanderbeg (married in April 1451).\textsuperscript{99} In his magnum opus, The History of the Life and Deeds of Skanderbeg, published in Rome in 1508–1510, the prominent historian and internationally known humanist Marinus Barletius from Shkodra mentions the primary role and importance of Donika Kastrioti, who ruled Skanderbeg’s state in his absence while he, at the head of about three thousand warriors, landed in Barletta in southern Italy in late August 1461 to aid King Ferrante I of Naples (r. 1458–1494).\textsuperscript{100} Donika enjoyed privileges and political rights even after Skanderbeg’s death on 17 January 1468.\textsuperscript{101} Indeed, according to Italian scholar Paolo Petta, on the same day he learned that Skanderbeg died, King Ferrante wrote to Jeronimo Caravigno, a trusted nobleman, ordering the latter to meet Donika and her son to assure them that if they were to resettle in his kingdom, “they would receive from me the care and honor that every son is obliged to give his mother and every father his son,” and that they would have their own fiefdoms as well as benefits if necessary.\textsuperscript{102}

Because King Ferrante I immediately offered his protection as well as the opportunity to receive the proceeds of their possessions in Monte Sant’Angelo and San Giovanni Rotondo (where Donika had stayed previously), Donika and her son de-
cided to settle in Naples, not in the Republic of San Marco. In these years of serious political upheavals within the Albanian territories (most of which fell under Ottoman occupation), Donika, together with her thirteen-year-old son, John, and accompanied by an array of people that, according to chronicler John Musachi, consisted mainly of widows and daughters of noble Albanian families who had lost their patriarchs in battles against the Ottomans (among them, the two sisters and granddaughters of the chronicler himself), were part of the great Albanian exodus to southern Italy. Donika Kastrioti spent the remainder of her life in the royal Aragonese court of Naples, where she enjoyed growing authority and privilege, as well as the support and friendship of Queen Joanna (Giovanna) of Aragon (r. 1476–1494), the second wife of Ferrante I. The fate of other Albanian nobles who emigrated to the Kingdom of Naples was not so bitter due to the friendship of the aforementioned queen, who must have contributed to their dowries, so that they were accepted into the bosom of the royal aristocracy, excelling in Neapolitan aristocratic society.

During the second half of the fifteenth century, Albanian women carried a considerable burden and played a significant role in defending their cities from Ottoman attacks and sieges. The bravery and heroism of girls and women of Shkodra in the defense of their city during its second siege (second half of 1478, beginning of 1479) did not escape the attention of Marinus Barletius in his first work entitled “The Siege of Shkodra” (De obsidione Scodrensi), published in Latin in Venice on 10 January 1504. After the fall of Drisht (1 September 1478) and of Shkodra and its surrounding area (25 April 1479) to the Ottomans, there would be no lack of pensions, provisions, privileges, or rights of asylum in Venice and Friuli. These were granted by the Venetian authorities to widows and girls from Drisht and Shkodra whose husbands and relatives had lost their lives in these wars. The Signoria of Venice not only provided help and support for families of the widows of commanders and other senior leaders of the army and representatives of the local nobility, but also for eighty families from Shkodra that belonged to the middle and lower classes.

Conclusion

This article reveals that the social position of both aristocratic and common women in urban settings in Albania in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in terms of rights, privileges, sociopolitical attributes, and so on, derived from the medieval models and practices of the Italo-Dalmatian area and the western Adriatic and Mediterranean area as a whole. The Statutes of Shkodra, for example, reflect a clear Venetian influence, for as long as Venice was also the social and cultural model of the Dalmatian-Albanian basin towns. By the end of the fourteenth century, when Venice ruled Shkodra, Durrës, Drisht, Ulqini, and Tivari, the Venetian Senate allowed local town statutes to function in terms of political, administrative, and territorial organization, as well as the administration of law. After all, this was a condition for creating peaceful relations with the local population and for maintaining social order and tranquility in the new possessions of the Republic of Venice. In this context, women in Albanian coastal towns enjoyed protections and property rights, including the right to seek divorce, to
be a guardian of property, to draft a will, to inherit half of the wealth in the family, and to sign various notarial acts. Medieval Albanian laws also protected the person, dignity, and honor of women. Insults, physical, and sexual violence against women were punishable by law. Women maintained these social-legal rights in civic municipalities governed on the basis of statutes.

At the same time, Albanian noblewomen actively participated in efforts to extend and protect their families’ landholdings and authority, negotiating with Venetian and Ottoman rulers and forming alliances through marriage. Indeed, the dynastic marriages of noble Albanian women were first and foremost political acts to consolidate alliances with neighboring principalities and noble families of the time. Several women from the ranks of the Albanian nobility, including Comnena Balšić, Rudina Balšić, Evdokia Balšić, Helena Thopia, and Andronika Comneniates, engaged in intensive and important political activity in governing their territories. Their political power and involvement were pervasive in both domestic and foreign policy. The right of noblewomen to govern in the surrounding towns and provinces was almost equal to that of noblemen. The leadership and position of these women in their political and diplomatic activities testify to the relative emancipation of the medieval Albanian nobility as compared to other social classes, oriented partly by the Slavo-Byzantine tradition, as well as by the western Mediterranean.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank several scholars for providing advice and spotting errors, among them Lucia Nadin, Pëllumb Xhufi, Gentiana Kera, and especially Sharon Kowalsky.

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Notes


2. See Bernd J. Fischer, Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri [King Zog and the struggle for stability in Albania] (Tiranë: Çabej, 1997); and Roberto Moroco dela Roka, Kombi dhe...


13. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 110–111. The statutes of Durrës, Ulqini, and Tivari have been lost. For Ulqini and Tivari, an attempt was made to rebuild them based on the prayers of these towns to Venice in the fifteenth century. The Statutes of Shkodra are fully preserved, and a copy was discovered recently in the *Albanica* (Albanian) fund of the Correr Museum in Venice by Italian researcher Lucia Nadin. The Statutes of Shkodra consist of 279 chapters written in the Venetian language of the fifteenth century, and as regards the date for their design, the terminus ante quem would be 1346.

16. Ibid., 118.

17. Ibid.


19. In the Middle Ages, the right to be a citizen or *civis* belonged to those persons who were free and participated in the election of the governing structures of the city.


21. Ibid.


24. Ibid., document no. XXVIII, 60–62.

25. Ibid., document no. XLV, 82–84: “Shkurt 1258—Shitja e një vreshtit pranë qytetit të Durrësit” [February 1258—Sale of a vineyard near the city of Durrës].

26. Dhimitër Homatjanq completed his studies in jurisprudence in Constantinople and around the year 1200 was sent to Ohrid as the *kartoflik* (custodian of the archive) of the archbishop (one of the most important assistants to the Patriarch), where he continued in this duty until the year 1216, when he became the archbishop (until 1234). See *Dokumente të periudhës bizantine* (shek. VII–XV), 58.

27. Ibid., document no. XXVIII, 61.

28. *Statuti di Scutari*, Chapter 256: “If it is proven that a lay person touches or beats a woman, or violates her house, he is punished with eight hyperpyron. If he violates another woman in the same way, he must pay eight hyperpyron; half to the Count and half to the victim.”
29. The cleric was punished with a fine of fifty hyperpyron, half of which went to the bishop, a quarter to the count as the representative of the Serbian royal government, and the remaining quarter to the victim. Statuti di Scutari, Chapter 200; Acta et Diplomata Res Albaniae Mediae Aetatis Illustrantia (colleguerunt et digesserunt Dr. Ludovicus de Thalloczy, Dr. Constantinus Jireček et Dr. Emilianus de Suffl ay) [Acts and diplomas of the illustrative matters of Albania in the Middle Ages (compiled and edited by Dr. Ludovicus de Thalloczy, Dr. Constantinus Jireček, and Dr. Emilianus de Suffl ay)], vol. I (Annos 344–1343 Tabelamque geographicam continens) [Years 344–1343 and containing a geographical table], document No. 527 (Vindobonae MCMXIII, ribotim, Tiranë, Prishtinë: “Dukagjini”—Pejë, 2002).

30. Statuti di Scutari, Chapter 201.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. See Gisela Bock, Le donne nella storia europea: Dal Medioevo ai nostri giorni [Women in European history: From the Middle Ages to our days] (Rome: Laterza, 2000), 8–14.
35. Ibid., 220–221: “The governor of Durrës, Pietro Arimondo, as it emerges from the move against him on 29 October 1409, had arrested Kirana, a citizen of Durrës, in order to force her to bear false witness that the testimony issued by the chancellor of Durrës, Nikola Parma (with whom the Venetian governor had an old score to settle), was false. The governor threatened torture using the most barbaric means to force her to act as he demanded. He had the chancellor of Durrës hanged after forcing Kirana to give the testimony that he demanded.”
36. Ibid., 221–222: “Heustak Grioni, one of the most infamous figures known to the inhabitants of Drisht between the years 1401–1402, in the most thuggish way imaginable, entered the house of citizen George Vars at night, when the latter was not present, in order to rape his wife. In the face of the great outrage that erupted in Drisht, the Signoria was forced to remove its governor before his term of service had expired in order to maintain the prestige of the state discredited by its governor.”
37. Statuti di Scutari, Chapter 265: “The man who has taken a woman into his home cannot cast her out for the sole reason that she keeps no dowry at home. There should be good reason to ask for the dowry. He who casts out his wife is punished with a fine of eight hyperpyron, half for the Count and half for the victim.”
38. Ibid., Chapter 165.
39. Ibid., Chapter 266.
40. Ibid., Chapter 168.
41. Ibid., Chapters 186, 196.
42. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë, 2 (1406–1410), document no. 374.
44. Ibid., document nos. 295, 374, 403. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë, 2 (1406–1410), document no. 214.
46. Ibid., document no. 228: “27 qershor 1402—Përfaqësuesi legal i një tivarasejë tërheq në Dubrovnik pasurinë që i ka lënë asaj e bija pas vdekjes” [27 June 1402—The legal representative of a citizen of Tivari withdraws to Dubrovnik, who has left her and her daughter upon death].
47. Ibid., document no. 410: “1 janar 1404—Vajza e Vlashit nga Ujqini, epitrope në një testament” [1 January 1404—the daughter of Vlashi from Ulqini, epitrope in a will].

49. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek XV, 1 (1400–1405), document no. 428: “20 prill 1404—Një tivarase bën prokurator për të nxjerrë dhe për të administruar pronat dhe pasuritë që ka trashëguar në Tivar e rethe” [20 April 1404—a citizen of Tivar became prosecutor in order to extract and administer the properties and assets he had inherited in Bar and its districts].

50. Ibid., document no. 63: “6 shtator 1400—E veja një mjeshtër këpucar durrsak dhuron një shtëpi në Durrës” [6 September 1400—The widow of a shoemaker from Durrës donates a house in Durrës]; Document no. 239: “4 gusht 1402—Gruaja e Nikollë Spanit nga Dristi shpërndan pasurinë që ka pasur i shoqi në Shqipëri” [4 August 1402—Nikolle Span’s wife from Drist distribut the wealth that her husband had in Albania].

51. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek XV, 1 (1400–1405), document no. 339; Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë, 2 (1406–1410), document no. 364.


53. Regjistri i kadastrës dhe i koncesioneve për rrithën e Shkodrës 1416–1417, fl. 2/a, 3/a, 9/a, 9/b, 10/b, 11/a, 19/b, 20/a, 21/a, 25/b, 30/a, 30/b, 35/a.

54. Statuti di Scutari, Chapter 166.

55. See Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka; Xhufi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt, 293.

56. Among the first dynastic marriages between Albanian and foreign nobles, Byzantine sources mention that of Demetrius (Dhimitri), ruler of the Principality of Arbanon (1208–1216), with Comnena Nemanjić, daughter of the Grand Prince of Serbia, Stefan Nemanjić (1196–1227), in 1208. Around the same time pansebastos sebastos Gregorios Camonas (governor of the Despotate of Epirus) married the daughter of Gjin Progoni, the second ruler of the Principality of Arbanon (1198–1208). Dokumente të periudhës bizantine (shek. VII–XV), document no. XXVI and XXVII, 54–60. The aunt of the chronicler John Musachi, Helena, married Venetian nobleman Filip Bareli, a citizen of Ragusa, former protovestiar (administrator) of the Balšić family. John Zenevisi, ruler of Gjirokastra and Vagenetia until 1418, married his sister to the Italian Petrotto d’Alta Vaila, a descendant of the early Norman dynasty that ruled southern Italy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. According to John Musachi, Comnen Arianiti married the daughter of Nicolo Sacati, former baron of the two cities in “Sendia” (according to Dh. Shutëri që this should be Serbia). Despina, the daughter of Ajdin Klope (ruler of Vrezda) and Helena Muzaka (sister of Andrea Muzaka, the grandfather of the chronicler John Musachi) married the sanjak-bey (military and governmental commander of a large unit in the time of the Ottoman Empire) of Ciorna, Ali Beu. At the beginning of the second half of the fourteenth century, George (Gjergj) Balšić married Olivera Mrnjavčevič, the daughter of Vukašin (Vukas hinh) Mrnjavčević (kralj—ruler of Western Macedonia and coruler of the King of Serbia Stefan Uroš V from 1365 to 1371). George (Gjergj) Arianiti, in addition to his first marriage to Mary Musachi (sister of Gjini II and aunt of the chronicler John Musachi) around late 1340, married the Italian Pietrina Francone from the city of Lecce (in southern Italy), the daughter of one the vassals of Alfonso V of Naples, Olivier Francone, “barone di Taurisano,” the governor of Lecce. Around 1461 Anxhelina (Angjelina) Arianiti (1440–1520) (who, according to German scholar and orientalist Franz Babinger, was daughter of George Arianiti from his first marriage, while according to the chronicle of John Musachi she was the daughter of George Arianiti from his second marriage) married the despot of Serbia, Stefan Branković (1458–1459), known as “Stefan the Blind” (son of Durad (Giorgio) Branković, despot of Serbia from 1427 to 1456). Skanderbeg’s son John Kastriot (1456–1502) married Jerina Branković, the third daughter of the despot Lazar Branković of Serbia (1456–1458) and Helena Paleolog (1431–1437). (There are plenty of other examples that we do not mention here). Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka, 432, 433, 435, 436, 448; Milan Šufflay, Serbë e Shqiptarët [The Serbs and Albanians], trans. Zef Feketi, Kal Gurakuqi, and Ze-

57. Konstantin Jireček, Historia e Serbëve [A History of Serbs], Part I (up to 1371), trans. from German by Elda Gjana-Boriçi (Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese “55”, 2010), 356: “Gruaja e tij, nuk e dimë, nëse e para, e dyta apo e treta, ishte francezja Helenë përafërsisht në vitin 1250” [His wife, whether the first, second or third, we know not, was the Frenchwomen Helena, in the year 1250 approximately].


63. Historia dhe gjenealogjia shtëpisë Muzaka, 429–430; Peter Bartl, Shqiptarët: Nga Mesjeta deri në ditët tona [The Albanians: From the Middle Ages to the present day], trans. from German by Afrim Koçi (Tiranë: IDK, 2017), 38–40.

64. Xhufi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakaqit, 315: “In the first option, Venice demanded that Kanina, Vlora and their districts be handed over to the Signoria unconditionally and with all the rights and jurisdiction that Comnena had herself. If Comnena did not accept this proposal, Venice was ready to offer a second option, according to which Comnena Balšić would receive all the income derived from her possessions as long as she lived; but at the same time she would bear all the necessary expenses for their protection. Meanwhile, a detachment of Venetian ballistas was to be stationed without delay in the Kanina tower and was to operate under the orders of the Signoria. This was the maximum amount of involvement that the Republic of San Marco promised for the protection of Vlora.”

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 316.

67. Ibid., 318–319: “Comnena Balšić asked the Senate of Venice to issue a statement in her favor which ensured that her and her citizens be put under the protection and authority of Venice, so that no one would disturb them. It was a pure act of vassalship, which would be consecrated with the symbolic gesture of sending three citizens of Comnena Balšić’s to perform military service in the Venetian fleet of the Adriatic. At this time an internal conflict arose between Comnena and Nikola Muzaka (a relative of Comnena) over the tower of Dieval, at the mouth of the river Seman. The tower of Dieval together with the emporium had belonged to Nikola Muzaka before August 1390, who had been captured by Comnena Balšić’s men. The defenders of the tower of Dieval did not surrender it without the release of their ruler, Nikola Muzaka. To quell the conflict, the Venetian bajl-kapiten of Corfu, Luigi de Priolis, intervened and decided that after the release of Nikola Muzaka, the tower of Dieval should be handed over to the Venetian authorities of Corfu. The Venetians gave Comnena Balšić the tower in question, but from then on, the ruler of Vlora would keep the tower as a vassal of the Signoria. As a
symbolic gesture of this vassality, Comnena Balšić henceforth, had to offer three of her men annually, to serve on the warships of Venice."

68. Ibid., 322.


70. Giuseppe Gelcich, Zeta dhe Dinastia e Balshajve [Zeta and the Balsha dynasty], trans. Laura Leka (Tirane: Shetpia Botuese “55”, 2009), 95: Balša II had no other children with Comnena Musachi apart from one girl, Rudina, who after his death would be found together with her mother under the rule of Vlora and Kanina, which belonged to her ancestors.


72. Šufflay, Serbët e Shqiptarët, 25.

73. Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka, 441.

74. Ibid.

75. Xuhi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt, 324. Even after the murder of Balša II in Savra, the Balšić family continued to be named Lords of Vlora. According to the Venetian chronicler and historian Marin Sanudo “the Younger” (1466–1536), Đurađ II Stracimir Balšić claimed to rule the lands that had belonged to his ancestors, although at that time Balša territory had shrunk considerably. Therefore, even after the tragedy of Savra, Đurađ Stracimir Balšić considered himself “the leader of the land from Vlora to Berat.”

76. Jireček, “Vlora në Mesjetë,” 135; Xuhi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt, 324. The Ottoman danger meant that this marriage, which was canonically illegal, could be tolerated.

77. Ibid., 332–333.


79. Ibid.


81. Ibid.; Constantinus Jireček, “Witwe und die Söhne des Despoten Esau von Epirus” [Widow and the sons of the Despot Esau of Epirus], Byzantisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher [Byzantine–modern Greek annuals] 1 (1920), 5. For more on this see Giuseppe Schirò, Jr., “Evdokia Balšić di Gianna” [Evdokia Balšić of Ioannina], Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta [Proceedings of the Byzantological Institute] 8 (1964), 383–391; Koço Bozhori, “Kronika e Tokove si burim për historinë e formacioneve shtetërore shqiptare të Jugut të shekullit XIV dhe në çerekun e parë të shekullit XV” [Chronicle of the Tocco as source on the history of the national formation of southern Albanians at the end of the XIV century and in the first quarter of the XV century], Studime Historike 3 (1976): 177 – 198; 183, 187. The Italian despot of Ioannina, Esau de' Buondelmonte Acciaiuoli, married Irena Shpata, the mother of Maurice Shpata, in 1396, but divorced her in 1402 in order to pursue marriage with Evdokia Balšić. According to the Chronicle of the Tocco, after Gjin Bua Shpata’s death on 29 October 1399, Maurice Shpata became the head of the principality. Shpata was Gjin’s nephew from his sister, and as such, the nephew of Sguro Bua Shpata (Gjin’s brother) from his sister, who was married to a French count, Mirsi Makazan. After the battle of Ankara in 1402, Maurice Shpata improved relations
not only with the Ottomans, but also with the despot Esau of Ioannina, who was Maurice’s stepfather. What is more, Esau of Ioannina asked for the hand of Maurice’s daughter for his own son from his marriage to Evdokia Balšić, daughter of Durad I Balsha. See Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, vol. I, 283.

82. Acta et Diplomata Res Albaaniae Mediae Aetatis Illustrantia [Acts and diplomas of the illustrative matters of Albania in the Middle Ages], compiled and edited by Dr. Ludovicus de Thalloczy, Dr. Constantinus Jireček, and Dr. Emilianus de Suffl-day, vol. II (Annos 1344–1406 Tabulamque geographician continens) [Years 1344–1406 and containing a geographical table], Vindobonae MCMXIII, ribotim (Tiranë, Prishtinë: “Dukagjini”—Pejë, 2002), document no. 699; Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë tê shek XV, 1 (1400–1405), 231, 234.


84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Xhufi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt, 326.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.


90. Šuffl-day, Serbët e Shqiptarët, 134: Another daughter of Charles Thopia was Vojsava or Vojislava, who died in 1394. She married Progon Dukagiini (Lekë I Dukagiini’s son) and later married a Venetian noble “Kyr Isac, Kursaka, as it is said, to the head of the families of Venetian Patrices, Engjëll.”


92. Xhufi, Nga Paleologët te Muzakajt, 316.

93. Thallóczy and Jireček, “Kruja e qarku i saj bërthamë e Shqipnis Mesjetore,” 72.


95. Acta Albanaiae, II, document nos. 524, 525; Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë tê shek XV, 1, document nos. 168, 169; Šuffl-day, Serbët e Shqiptarët, 134.

96. Šuffl-day, Serbët e Shqiptarët, 135. See also Thallóczy and Jireček, “Kruja e qarku i saj bërthamë e Shqipnis Mesjetore,” 73.

97. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë tê shek XV, 1, document no. 267; Šuffl-day, Serbët e Shqiptarët, 134.


100. Barleti, Historia e Skënderbeut, 392–393: “And so, with an army of mighty lads in their prime, he crossed over and arrived at Daunë; but, before leaving the kingdom, with great care
and wisdom he hastily made an agreement with Mehmed II, the ruler of the Turks, and made a truce with him for a year. There is no doubt that [Skanderbeg] arranged and secured all other matters related to his rule as was necessary, the direction and protection of which he left in the hands of his wife and some friends from the nobility.” Frashëri, Historia e Skënderbeut, 379–380; Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, vol. I, 442–443; Biçoku, Skënderbeu, 179–180. As a token of gratitude for this help, the king of Naples donated to Skanderbeg the lands of Monte Sant’Angelo and San Giovanni Rotondo, and an annual pension of 1,200 ducats.

101. Paolo Petta, Despotë të Épiri e princër të Magedonisë: Mërgata shqiptare në Italinë e periudhës së Rilindjes [The despots of Epirus and Prince of Macedonia: The Albanian Diaspora in the Italian Renaissance], trans. Pëllumb Xhufi (Tiranë: Botimet IDK, 2001), 32: “Donika had hastened to write on 24 February 1468 to the king of Naples, Ferdinand I, to inform him of the loss of her husband: and on that occasion the king had responded immediately, expressing that, the death of Skanderbeg, who for me he was like a second father . . . was no less devastating than that of my own honored and unforgettable father, King Alfonso.”

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.; Biçoku, Skënderbeu, 202. The Senate of Venice decided to send Paul Angel to Albania, who for many years had been staying there as Skanderbeg’s representative. As soon as he arrived in Albania, Paul Angel talked to Skanderbeg’s wife and son and other relatives of the Kastriot family and asked them to consign Kruja and other possessions to Venice. When Skanderbeg’s wife and son left Albania, Kruja was handed over to the Venetians.

104. Historia dhe gjenealogjia e shtëpisë Muzaka, 419–420: “His wife, Lady Skanderbeg, after her husband’s death, went to the kingdom of Naples together with her son, Mr./sir John, and two of my sisters who had lost their husbands in war traveled with the mentioned lady. One of them was Lady Mary, wife of sir Musachi Comneni, who was called by the people Danxhelin, the other one was Lady Helen, married to sir George (Gjergj) Karles. Lady Mary had with her a young lady named Lady Porfa senior, whereas Lady Helen had with her another girl named Lady Vojislava. Other ladies came along as well who were all welcomed by the above mentioned king.”

105. Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërisë [Documents of the XV century for the history of Albania], vol. IV (1479–1506), Part I (1479–1499), ed. Injac Zamputi (Tiranë: Universiteti shtetëror i Tiranës—Instituti i Historisë dhe i Gjuhësisë, 1967), document no. 147: “18 gusht 1489—The King of Sicily decided that Donika Kastrioti be sent an Albanian by named Kolë.”

106. Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë 1479–1506 [Documents for the history of Albania 1479–1506], Part II (1499–1506), ed. Injac Zamputi (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e RPSSH—Instituti i Historisë, 1979), document no. 180: 18 janar 1501—Nga ditaret e Marin Sanudos. E veja e Skënderbeut, Donika, është shoqëruesja e mbretëreshës së Napolit (January 18, 1501, From the diary of the Venetian Marino Sanudo. According to the Venetian Marino Sanudo (1466–1536), Skanderbeg’s widow, Donika, was the lady-in-waiting of the queen of Naples).

107. Petta, Despotë të Épiri e princër të Magedonisë, 137.

108. Marinus Barletius, De obsidione Scodrensi (Venice: Bernardinus Venetus de Vitalibus, 1504–1505), trans. Henrik Lacaj as Marin Barleti, Rrethimi i Shkodrës [The Siege of Shkodra], trans. Henrik Lacaj, ed. David Hosaflook (Tiranë: Onufri, 2012), 206–207: “Enemy flags were raised a thousand times upon the ramparts. Hand-to-hand combat unfolded even in the heart of the city. No citizen of any social class emerged unscathed . . . And, oh, the girls and women! They did not let the men outshine them in bravery! You could see the boy perishing in the presence of his mother, the husband in the sight of his wife, the brother fallen down to the earth in front of his sister. Nevertheless these women did not fix their eyes thereupon but continually readied arms for the stronger soldiers to use against the enemy. They accomplished every task
entrusted to them and relieved soldiers of many tasks while they rested briefly or bound their wounds. No one was intimidated by cannons, weapons, wounds, or death. All were committed to one purpose—saving the city—even if it meant spilling their last drop of blood.”


111. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, vol. IV (1479–1506), Part I (1479–1499), document nos. 24, 25, 60, 62, 146, 188.

112. *Dokumete për historinë e Shqipërës* 1479–1506, Part II (1499–1506), Appendix to the first part (1479–1499), document nos. 43, 46.

113. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, Part I (1479–1499), document no. 57; *Dokumete për historinë e Shqipërës* 1479–1506, Part II (1499–1506), Appendix to the first part (1479–1499), document no. 33.

114. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, Part I (1479–1499), document nos. 11, 12, 35; *Dokumete për historinë e Shqipërës* 1479–1506, Part II (1499–1506), Appendix to the first part (1479–1499), document no. 26.

115. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, Part I (1479–1499), document nos. 30, 31; *Dokumete për historinë e Shqipërës* 1479–1506, Part II (1499–1506), Appendix to the first part (1479–1499), document nos. 24, 25.


117. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, Part I (1479–1499), document nos. 35, 57, 62; *Dokumete për historinë e Shqipërës* 1479–1506, Part II (1499–1506), Appendix to the first part (1479–1499), document nos. 26, 33.

118. *Dokumenta të shekullit XV për historinë e Shqipërës*, Part I (1479–1499), document no. 29.