

## **Urban physiognomy and political and economic developments in the city of Durrës (1200- 1501)**

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### **Abstract**

The city of Durrës during the middle Ages, despite extensive devastations caused by human factor and natural disasters, managed to maintain the continuity and physiognomy of a developed city of the Mediterranean region. Compared to many other cities of the Adriatic coast and broader, it had a more sustainable development, be it in the political-social field and in the urban architectural domain as well. More distinctive were the works carried out in the fortification of the city started by Anastas I. All these would not be possible without the establishment and functioning of the institutions of the city such as the council of the city, panel of judges, two magistrates and other credible institutions. The city had its stamp, emblem and statute thus witnessing the enhancement of political life. The development of the city was also promoted by its geographical position, located at the beginning of Via Egnatia that connected Western to Eastern Europe. The development of Durrës was also conditioned by a range of factors of various natures, which changed the city into an important centre of transit trade, competing with important centres of Eastern Adriatic.

**Keywords:** Durrës, institutions, council, urban, trade etc.

### **Introduction**

This manuscript aims to shed some light in the city of Durrës and on the oscillations of its economic development in centuries XI-XV, starting from the fact that direct and compact work is not possible in the historic opinion. For its compilation the author has been based on broad resources with primary focus on archival resources and in putting in motion a set of methods dominated by the analysis, comparisons and synthesis. This paper shall serve as a core of a broader paper about Durrës for the period (XI-XV) and its relationships with other Balkan and Mediterranean cities.

### **Urbanism and Architecture**

During the transitional period from antiquity in the early Middle Ages, a period of downsizing of the city areas is noted and leaving it out of architectural attention. This situation is explained by the lecherousness suffered by governmental, economic and infrastructural systems, etc. The crisis of antique systems was followed by massive devastations that the cities suffered from the barbarian attacks. During this "dark" period, many cities remained as such, others lost their earlier glamour, surviving as simple centres of military and administrative or Episcopal type. In this wave of systems where an era of turbulence and massive destructions dominated, Durrës city also, as many Albanian cities, sustained considerable damages. But compared to

others, it had a different course. This is mainly dedicated to the Byzantium emperor, Anastas I (491-518) (Ostrogorski, 1997, 39), who fortified his city of birth, Durrës, with three ranges of fortification wall. They were mainly built by bricks and their width reaches thickness of 3.50 m. For every 60-65 meters, strong towers were constructed in shape of five angles, with a height of 18 meters, with three levels (floors). Walls of the city contained a large number of entrances. Only two of them are preserved in relatively good condition. According to evidence and studies, the main entrance of the city was on the northeast side. According to description by Ana Komnena, in front of such entrances there were old statues located depicting an antique knight made of bronze, which is believed to have remained since Roman Empire time and was dedicated to Hadrian Emperor (Anamali et al, 2002, 356) Architectural values of Durrës in the field of art of fortification go beyond provincial borders. According to the Procopius of Caesarea, the type of construction applied in Rome at the time of the Emperor Justinian, was implemented and at the castle of Durrës (Anamali et al, 2002, 357). This city, in the early centuries of medieval era continued to be the city "Metropol" of Illyricum (Anamali et al, 2002, 259). The most fortified centre of the city (*castrum*) was located in the dominating part of the city. There stayed the garrison of the city. Amongst the most important monuments of medieval pro-Ottoman architecture are undoubtedly the monuments of Christian cult. They were magnificent buildings of basilica type or of a type with a central plan metrics. In general the first type prevailed. As for Durrës the basilica Arapaj was distinguished (in the outskirts of the city), amongst the greatest of the time. As a city influenced by east and west, clearly reciprocal influences of Byzantium and western architecture are noted. According to archaeological and historical evidence, in 1255, despot of Arta Teodor Engjëlli, refortified an important tower a the northern wing of the city. In 1280, Angevins, with the purpose of protecting the port of the city, constructed a tower at the western wing, which through a fortification wall was connected to Byzantium castle of the city (Anamali et al, 2002, 259). Durrës, happened many times to be under attacks and strikes of foreign armies, coming from east and west, dictated the necessity (more than any other city) of continuous strengthening of the fortification system. Reconstruction of the fortification walls and towers were a permanent undertaking in the city. In exceptional moments of risk almost unpredictable measures were undertaken for the existing opportunities of the time. To protect the city from powerful Ottoman strikes in the early years of XV century A major project was conceived in Durrës (Anamali et al, 2002, 259), which forecast the opening of a water canal in the east wing, turning the town into an island city. But the aim to achieve a more effective protection, led to the phenomenon of significant contraction of civic space. The clearest evidence appears in the footsteps of the fortification of the city in the years 1423 and 1437 (Nepравishta, AIH, A-II-16, No. Inv. 233, 20). The natural disasters such as fires, flooding, earthquakes etc. were factors that seriously damaged the view and urban structure of the cities. An earthquake in 1269 (Anamali et al, 2002, 262), almost completely destroyed the city of Durrës. Only the Acropolis remained undamaged. Natural and human (wars) disasters, epidemic diseases, etc., were accompanied by reducing the number of urban population. This different situation, often forced the governmental authorities of Durrës to newly dimension urban area, in accordance

with the existing number of population. To minimize the effects coming from natural disasters, often were issued acts to discipline the construction of houses and for maintenance of urban infrastructure.

### **Governing Institutions of the City**

The Albanian city in its course from antiquity to the Middle Ages (until the eve of the XV century) comes with a real history (Riza, 2009, 30), with more or less the same step and essential characteristics with those of European cities. Cities of Arberia in XIII-XIV centuries were raised enough in economic aspect as well as in the field of culture. Cities like Durrës, Shkodra, Drisht, Kruja etc. had gained privileges and had formed their political organization (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 49). They had established the foundations of the municipal economy. Bodies of these municipality cities were selected councils of the cities (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 50). Council headed the city life and elected the Panel of Judges (Thëngjilli, 1999, 73). In Durrës there were two "Sworn magistrates or night officials" who organized the order and the service of night guards (Thëngjilli, 1999, 73). Albania municipality cities had the palace of city council in the centre. Every city has its own emblem and a patron saint archangel. Durres patron saint was St. John Vladimir (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 59), each municipality had its own stamp too (Thëngjilli, 1999, 74). Development of the city of Durrës, as well as other coastal Arberia cities, as "autonomous" municipalities was expressed in the direct relationship with other municipalities of the time, as legal persons for problems of economic nature of mutual interest in creating offices running domestic life of the city and governance of the municipality in the existence of statutes etc. (Malltezi, 1988, 28). Foreigners who lived in the city did not enjoy the right to elect and be elected in civic bodies. Despite this, they enjoyed special protection for their lives and property. Venice and Ragusa had their consuls in the city of Durrës (Anamali et al, 2002, 262), who protected the interests of their citizens. Although between citizens native of Durrës and foreigners often occurred misunderstandings and disputes, these did not reach to organizations to displace them from the city. This was also because there were regular bilateral agreements, which guaranteed the lives and property of the citizens from Venice and Ragusa. But in cases of political crisis between the city of Durrës and Venice and Ragusa, entrepreneurs and traders, with activities in Durrës and originating from those countries, became subject to the attacks by locals (Durrës citizens). On the basis of documents, there were development treaties signed between Republic of Venice or that of Ragusa on the one hand and Byzantine ruler (when Durrës was under Byzantine rule) or Albanian princes, to provide reparation to their citizens who were damaged (Anamali et al, 2002, 263). With weakening and fall of the Byzantine Empire, Durrës became subject to direct invasion by Normans, Serbs etc., who were trying to eventually destroy the empire that was experiencing the agony since XI century. Among the enemies coming from the West to Byzantium to distinguish was the Republic of Venice. This, among others, was seeking to extend its rule in the cities of the Albanian coast primarily in Durrës. Theme of Dyrrhachium was one of the most important for the protection of western borders of the empire (Ferluga, 1964, 117-130), was the bridgehead to Constantinople. These rival countries,

to realize their projects toward Durrës and beyond, were seeking amongst others to ensure domestic support. This rivalry climate was used by the leadership of the city of Durrës, which managed to ensure step by step enough rights and privileges that came expanded, until their self-governance, assuming more and more the physiognomy of an autonomous civic municipality. Historical sources indicate the privileges that Durrës citizens (Archivio Stato di Venezia (further ASV) Senatus Deliberationes Mixtae (further Sent. Misti.), R. 42/110(109)v; R. 43/15 (16); R. 45/116 (115)v – 118 (117); R. 54/131 (132)) had under Byzantium. Based on evidence, in the centuries XIV – XV, others were not allowed to bring salt in the markets of river gorges in the north of their city, markets which claimed to be included in the jurisdiction of the municipality of Durrës (ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 45/116 (115) v-118 (117). Conferring privileges by the central government of Byzantium in favor of Durrës with suburbs is evidence of an advanced stage of development. In this case we have to do with an economic and political emancipation of the internal forces of Durrës, which were imposed to the falling central power. The recognition and respect of human rights and privileges was done for Durrës a fundamental issue in relations with the Superior Serbian or Venetian power. The best evidence about what was mentioned above comes from Charles of Anjou. On the occasion of establishment of "Kingdom of Arbëria" (Regnum Albanie, 1272) he announced that "*all privileges that were given by the old emperors of Rome*" would be respected (Frasheri, 1962, doc. 46, 92-93). Almost the same significance has the diploma issued "to all Durrës citizens" by the prince of Tarent, Philip (5 September 1304), which recognized "*all immunities, freedoms, liberties, forgiveness and privileges*" that were recognized before by his grandfather Charles of Anjou I (Frasheri 1962, Doc. 46, 92-93). For direct relations as a legal person in the municipality of Durrës with Ragusa, testifies the presence in Ragusa (27 August 1302) of Pjetër Romano, "*Ambassador of the municipality of Durrës*" (ambixiator comunis Durrachii), (Monumenta Ragusiana V (1301-1330), (1897). According to acts that are found in the archive of Ragusa, it is proven, besides the presence of a "Council" in Durrës also that of the captain of the city as a representative of the superior Angevin power. According to a document, seeking reparations for damages that some Ragusa traders had suffered from Durrës people, Ragusa (26 January 1324) addressed to "Captain of the Council and the Municipality of Durres", (capitaneo, consilio et comuni civitatis Durrachij) (Historiskij arhiv u Dubrovniku (further HAD), Reformationes I/64. In function of continuity, archives of Venice of century XV are referred to. These are encountered with the bodies of coastal Albanian cities. Presence of a "Council of Ten" is proven in Durrës (Malltezi, 1988, 29), "Sworn Judges" (juradi iudices) as representative bodies of the municipalities in relation with other municipalities. Sworn Judges of the municipality were elected according to the statutes of the cities and had the right to put the stamp on the signed acts of the municipality. Important figure of the municipality was the notary. He would formulate and edit, according to the legal requirements of the time, acts, orders and decisions of the municipality. Each municipality had a chancellor office which under direction of a notary archived all documentation of the municipality. In a notary office of the municipality, there were compiled also acts for private matters of the population such as: wills, acts of purchase, contractual acts between the parties for commercial cases

(Malltezi, 1988, p. 28). In addition to local notaries, mainly clergy, municipalities accepted foreign notaries. On 27 December 1214, an agreement between the two Ragusa traders was written and formulated in Latin language according to legal requirements of the time by "Notary of Durrës the Priest Domenic" (A. Alb., 1918, doc. no. 144). In Durrës, acts were written in Greek language too. According to evidence of the year 1401, there were notaries in Durrës "latini et greche" (A. Alb. 1918, doc. no. 180; ASV, Sent. Misti, R. 45/116 (115) v-118 (117). Along with these languages, at this time Slavic language usage is also proven. Use of these foreign languages does not impeach ethnic character of the population of Durrës with its suburban area. They were used as a language of culture, as well as in other countries. Around the middle of the century XIV, Durrës had applied a free customs policy in relations with foreign tradesmen. First item of evidence of this policy comes from the year 1363, when Durrës lived for some time as a free municipality (A. Alb., 1918, doc. no. 180). In relations between municipalities often happened that the injured party responded with repressive, economic and customs measures to force the other municipality to give up from arbitrary type attitudes. According to evidence, this phenomenon was applied by the Republic of Venice to the municipality of Durrës. On 28 March 1363, captain of Venetian fleet in the Adriatic received orders to threaten directly the municipality of Durrës.

According to the order, all Venetian traders would be ordered to leave the city and they would not allow traders from Durrës to trade their goods in Venice, in the event that the municipality of Durrës would not waive its customs policy (A. Alb., 1918, doc. no. 187). Municipality of Durrës, as well as other municipalities of coastal cities, from the funds they accumulated from the activities and different property they possessed, were obliged to pay liability toward feudal lord, as well as to the foreign rulers or to high local owners. In order to collect the amount of money that was quite large, "the municipality of the city, in 1363, took a decision for a new tax on goods imported from abroad" (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 33). As for Durrës to be distinguished is the obligation towards the Princedom of Topiaj in the second half of the century XIV. When the Angevins had the power over the municipality of Durrës, they were obliged to give the count Tanush Topia, circa 1338, an annual contribution in cash (1000 grosh / stivers). In a way Angevins were forced to take into consideration the seriousness of this powerful nobleman imposed to them (Frasheri 1962, Doc. no. 72, 118). These benefits were ensured by domestic feudals from Venetians as well, when they started to rule Durrës since 1392.

### **Trade and Crafts**

During XIII – XIV centuries, Albania stood out in Balkans as an area with rapid economic and cultural development. Durrës, as a centre with ancient antique traditions was further developed in this period, as a centre of exchange and production. It was characterized with significant and broad development in the internal and external plan. It had a considerable weight in the political life of the country. This economic and cultural flourishing of Durrës was not only a result of further development of the feudal relations, but also because Durrës was located at the entrance of Via Egnatia

linking the west with the east. This was the main factor that transformed Durrës in an important centre of transit trade in the Balkan and Mediterranean area. A class of traders began to grow and develop which began to control, the internal trade with other cities and provinces, as well as with Balkan-Mediterranean area. This class started playing an increasing role in the life of the city and the country. The weight of this class in empowerment was felt by different rulers. In 1210, Despot of Arta, Mihal Engjëll Komneni, promised traders of Durrës that he would not collect taxes from them and would allow them to freely trade everywhere (Frasheri 1962, Doc. no. 35, 84.). While Charles I Anjou, 1274, ordered customs officers of the Kingdom of Sicily to respect the customs privileges that he had accorded to traders of Durrës (Frasheri 1962, Doc. no. 52, 97). Enough archival evidence proving the activity of traders of Durrës with two most powerful republics, Venice and Ragusa, but also with Kotor, Ancona, Brindisi etc (A. Alb., vol., II, 1918, doc. no. 169, 375; doc. no. 162, notes; doc. no. 275). In Durrës was a category of traders and local entrepreneurs, closely connected to the economic interests with Ragusa and especially with Venice. They would export and import different goods. This category of tradesmen, also due to the cosmopolitan cultural education, pretended to be originally Venetian (*pro Venetis expediuntur*). This category enjoyed the support of Venice, which became apparent at the moment when Durrës fell under Venetian rule (1392). At this time, in the community of this contingent, was also included the archbishop of Durrës, as well as some powerful noblemen of the surrounding area (Anamali et al, 2002, 264). Trade ties of the port city of Durrës with the outside world included a wide area. The activity of Durrës traders with foreign markets shows a growing role played by the category of traders in economic life of the city and the suburb areas, and beyond. There is a lot of documentary material that demonstrates that many foreign merchants came to Durrës to collect domestic products, as well as to trade their own goods. According to the Byzantine recorder, Anna Komnena, in Durrës, since in the XI century There were colonies of traders from Amalfi, Venice, but also others for whom the recorder did not express their nationality (Bozhori & Liço, 1975, 96-99). After the Republic of Venice discontinued the trade privileges from Byzantium, Durrës became a permanent entry gate for Venetian trade. In addition to settlement of Venetian traders, in Durrës since 1279 the consuls were settled too (A. Alb., vol., I, 1918, doc. no. 144). Durrës drew the attention of Ragusa traders too. Early trade of Ragusa is testified through an act of trade agreement between Ragusa and the state of Arbër in the period 1208-1215. According to it, Dhimiter as the lord and along with him 13 Albanian noblemen ensured Ragusa for free trade in the Principality of Arbëria. In the year 1256, friendly and intensive relations are witnessed that many merchants from Durrës had, where Petro Vrana is distinguished, conducting trade with traders from Ragusa. Provisions of the early statute of Ragusa (1272) witness of the periodical contacts of the province of Durrës with the state of Ragusa (Krekić, 1961, doc. No. 8, 30-31). Among the evidence in this statute was the presence of Durrës coins (stamenos) in Ragusa (Krekić, 1961, doc. No. 8, 30-31). Consuls from Ragusa were present in Durrës (in Spinarica), in September 1301 (Monumenta Ragusiana V (1301-1330), (1897). Economic potential of the city of Durrës, along with the income it generated alone, was also grounded on the close ties it had with suburbs, from where

various items were ensured which were traded inside and outside the country. In an act of the year 1392 it was said that there were large territories around Durrës that with the cereals and many other products they produced, made it a rich city (Malltezi, 1988, p. 38). Close economic ties between the city and the suburb were sanctioned in the legal aspect too. In centuries XIII–XIV, Durrës was recognized internally and externally as a civic municipality with clear borders and jurisdiction. It included villages around as well, which along with the city formed an economic and territorial unity. Among the most important items with an impact on inter-provincial ties was definitely salt, "oil" of the Middle Ages, as qualified then. The absence of this article in internal areas, particularly in Kosovo, had connected the latter with the port city of Durrës. The link was mutual. Regular and continuous movements are evident with convoys loaded with lead and other minerals from Kosovo towards Durrës, from where in return they were loaded with salt of Durrës. Salt trade from Durrës into depth of the country according to evidence was very old, from XI century, according to the Byzantium recorder Ana Komnena (Bozhori&Liço, 1975, 86). For supply with salt, in Durrës came traders from Ulcin, Tivar, Shkodra, Drisht etc. The municipalities of Ulcin and Tivar were drawing from Durrës annually about 900 modes of salt. Based on the evidence from that time, the municipality of Durrës enjoyed for quite a long time the right to supply the markets on its north with its salt and no salt from other regions would be brought there (Acta Albania Veneta, doc. No. 878; A. Alb., vol., II, 1918, doc. no. 669). Even the categories not belonging to noblemen seem to have dealt with trade in Durrës (Schmitt, 2007. 156). Under the Ottoman rule, Durrës trade was reduced significantly. Trade now in the largest part went through Thessaloníki. Once a great city of 30,000 inhabitants, the trade emporium flourishing in the Adriatic Sea at the last Turkish era was a poor oriental port with a population that barely reached to 4,000 - 5,000 residents (Nepravishta, AIH, A-II-16, no. Inv. 233, 21). Arbëria with passable canyons was rich with many roads, such as the road connecting Adriatic with the Central Europe, which as marked in the geographical maps was the route Via di Zenta, which started from two ports: from Durrës and from Lezha. One branch passed along the shores of Lake of Shkodra and entered the Metohia, while the other through Vau i Dejes - Ford of Deje reaching Prizren and this way entered deep in Serbia (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 47). Another route heading from Durrës and through Central Arbëria reached in Dibra. Inter-Balkan importance had the road linking Durrës with Macedonia, Thrakea and Constantinople. In this great road that acts mentioned it by the name "King's Road" served for the large caravans of trade to go through (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 47). Craftsmen increased their activity in Durrës. They "worked in the city markets for fairs in the country, but also for those of pan-Balkan character in Peja, Skopje, Thessaloniki and beyond". (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 43). Silk was prepared in factory and within household economy, especially in the area of Durrës and Pilot. The Stone carving to decorate buildings was widespread in Durrës, Shkodra, Ulcin, etc. Bakers of the cities of Arbëria were capable craftsmen known for producing good bread, but those from Durrës were heard of in all Adriatic area (Pepo, AIH, A-II-33, 44). All these socio-economic and political developments were enabled to Durrës as a result of a very important geo-strategic position between east and west.

## Conclusions

Based on the historical sources as well as on relevant literature, it may be concluded that Durrës was the most important centre of trade, economy and culture during the medieval period in the eastern Adriatic coast. This city remained a connecting bridge between east and west exercising a reciprocal impact in all aspects of social-political, cultural and religious life. Being a city located in the border between the Byzantine Empire and the western world was desired by both civilizations and as a result of this became a target of many attacks and invasions which left traces in the history of the city. With the falling under Ottoman rule, Durrës earned new features of oriental culture increasing even more the cultural heterogeneity and making it a special city in the entire history of Adriatic cities, but at the same time also losing the importance it had until that time.

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