

NORTHERN EPIRUS: HELLENISM THROUGH TIME

“Epirus, Primitive Hellas”. With these words Claudius Ptolemeos (2nd c. A.D.) characterizes this region of Greece, whilst Aristotle (4th c. B.C.) calls it “Hellas, the Ancient”.

The name of Epirus has always been related to the fate of Hellenism, 3.000 years of indisputable and continuous presence of the Greek culture are maintained by the innumerable archaeological sites and monuments found Epirus. In the “infinite land” (infinite = άπειρος [apeiros], as Epirus is called in Doric dialect) Hellenism has lived and flourished throughout history; where nowadays it still lives, fights and resists...

When historians refer to “EPIRUS”, they do not only mean the four provinces of NW Greece, but NORTHERN EPIRUS as well, that part of the united Epirus that is now under the Albanian domination, due to political expediencies. For Procopius (6th c. A.D.), Epirus stretches up to the town of Epidamnus (Dyrhacchion) “Up to the city of Epidamnus, situated by the sea, there are Greeks, who are called Epirots”. There, at Epidamnus, the borders of the Epirotic tribes are placed by Thucydides as well. Dionysius the Traveler (1st c. B.C.) specifies the borders at the north of Avlona. The ancient dictum “The beginning of Greece leans upon the land of Orikos” has Greece to begin from the Orikos region. Finally, Strabo (1st c. A.D.) regards as boundary between the Epirots and Illyrian tribes the Genoussos River and the neighboring Via Egnatia, which started from Dyrhacchion and reached Byzantium. Epidamnus (Dyrhacchion) was a Corinthian and Corcyran colony. The Epirots were allowed to participate in the Olympic Games, while the citizens of Epidamnus were involved in the Peloponnesian War as allies of Athens and Corcyra. The unity of the Epirotic region (Northern and Southern) with the rest of Greece is evident and indisputable throughout the ancient history.

The first inhabitants of Epirus are considered to be Pelasgi. Later on, the Ionians make their appearance in the region and after them the Dorians, who finally dominated. According to Theopompus (4th c. B.C) the epirotic tribes were 14 while, according to Strabo, 11 – all of which Greek. The oracle of Dodoni, dedicated to Zeus, was the religious center of all Epirots. The Greek hero Achilles offered sacrifices to Dodoneus Zeus. Statues of the same god were found all over Northern Epirus. The worship of Apollo, Aphrodite, Artemis – Diana, Athena, Poseidon – Neptune, Dionysus, Asclepius was also widespread as in the rest of Greece.

Historical sources and archaeological findings prove the existence of active Hellenism in Vouthroto (near Ag. Saranda), Antigonea (Tepeleni), Epidamnus (Dyrhacchion) Antipatrea (Berati), Apolonia (Pogiani-Fieri), Vyllida, Astaki, Amandia (Pliosia), Chimera (Chimarra), Panormo, Foiniki, Ogchismos (Ag. Saranda), Adrianoupolis – Dryinoupolis, Nymphaion, Orikos, that is in the whole of the Northern Epirus region. The unity of the cultural heritage of Northern Epirus with that of the rest of Greece is manifested and maintained by the archaeological works: In Apolonia, a Corinthian and Corcyran colony, archaeologists have found temples dedicated to Apollo, Artemis – Diana and Poseidon – Neptune, as well as a Greek theatre; in Nymphaion, Attic vessels and tomb anaglyphs, representing scenes of the Greek mythology, statues of Dodoneus Zeus, of Lyceos Apollo, Virgin Athena, Demeter, Hermes, Apollo, Atlas holding Uranus on his shoulders, a bust of Demosthenes, a necropolis with many findings etc.

In Vouthroto (Ag. Saranda), which, according to Virgil was built by Elenus, a hero of the Trojan war, there are findings of ancient walls, a Temple of Asclepius, a Gymnasium, a magnificent ancient theater, a prytaneion, Apollo's head, an altar dedicated to Dionysus and many inscriptions in Greek language. Moreover, in the neighboring Foiniki, archaeologists excavated a theatre, tombs with sarcophaguses, a temple of Athena, a Gymnasium, etc. It should be noted that Foiniki, still keeps its ancient Greek name: Foiniki, capital of Chaonia.

In Vyllida (close to Fieri) archaeologists brought to light: the famous theater combining the Doric and Ionian style, a gymnasium, a stadium, burial buildings influenced by the Macedonian style, an ancient forum, a house featuring a peristyle yard and multi-colored mosaics, a coin representing Dodoneus Zeus, Artemis – Diana, Hercules, Achilles or Alexander the Great, as well as inscriptions in Greek language. Despite all this evidence, the Albanian nation, following the practice adopted by Skopje, presents all these Hellenic monuments as Albanian cultural legacy...

The Macedonian king Alexander the Great descended from Epirus, from his mother Olympiad, the daughter of Neoptolemus 1st, king of Molossus. Molossus kingdom, a great epirotic tribe, reaches its maximum flourishing in the 3rd century B.C., during king Pyrrhus's era. Pyrrhus managed to unify all epirotic tribes, and attempted to conquer the Italian Peninsula. Unified Epirus – Northern and Southern – from Acheloos River up to Aous River, experienced a period of glory and grandeur. One century later, the Romans

dominated, and a period of decline and disaster come for the Greek cultural inheritance in unified Epirus.

Apostle Paul very soon brings the Holy Words of Jesus Christ in Epirus. There are martyrs from Northern Epirus since the early centuries: St. Asteius, Bishop of Dyrhacchion (98 A.D.), St. Eleftherios, Bishop of Avlona (120 A.D.), St. Donatos, Bishop of Foiniki (250 A.D.), Deacon Isavros (3rd c. A.D.). The presence of Bishops in Ecumenical Synods (since 381 A.D.), proves how organized the Church was in that region. The large number of paleo-Christian baptisteries preserved (in Vouthroto, Foiniki, Achrida), reveal the development of the Christian Church in Epirus.

The advancement of temple construction is also impressive: Paleo-Christian Basilicas featuring beautiful mosaics have been found in Vouthroto, Vyllida, Amandia, Dyrhacchion, Mesaplik, Achrida. Later on, the Byzantine and post-Byzantine architecture presents us with: the Assumption of Virgin Mary in Labovo, St. Nikolaos in Berati, Virgin Mary in Zervati (10 c. A.D), St. Ioannis in Bobostitsa- Korytsa, St. Nikolaos in Mesopotamos, Virgin Mary in Boria – Korytsa, and in the region of Berati: Virgin Mary of Vlacherna, St. Michael and Holy Trinity (12th – 14th century), St. Kyriakos of Douviani, the Birth of Virgin Mary in Episkopi (16th century), St. Prodromos in Moschopolis – Korytsa and Virgin Mary of Kokamia (17th century), St. Nikolaos in Moschopolis (18th century) etc.

The art of hagiography developed in the area of Northern Epirus is also amazing. The most ancient hagiographies date back in the 12th century (Virgin Mary in Boria – Korytsa). The artists follow the Byzantine style. Some of the most significant hagiographers were Onoufrios and his son Nikolaos (16th century), who worked in Temples in Berati and Kastoria. Other significant hagiographers were Onoufrios the Cypriot (17th century) and David from Selenitsa (18th century). At this point, it should be underlined that all inscriptions were written in Greek language. The unity of art in both Southern and Northern Epirus as well as in Western Macedonia proves the relation that existed between these parts of Greece.

During the decadence of the Byzantine Empire, in the area of unified Epirus, the “Domain of Epirus” was founded, stretching from Arta to Dyrhacchion. Since 1449, Epirus is occupied by the Turks. The Christian Epirots from the Northern regions resist under the leadership of the “Epirot Prince” Georgios Kastriotis (known as Skenderbey). The Albanians have him to be of Illyrian origin, despite his outright statement of the opposite, which is also inscribed on an Albanian stamp.

During the sable years of slavery, the Hellenism of Northern Epirus suffers: the Turks are trying to impose islamization by force. Those who are persuaded, become fanatic Muslims and anti-Greeks. Hundreds of New Martyrs emerge from Northern Epirus region, and the phenomenon of Secret Christians of Spatia, is really touching as well. The Hellenism of Northern Epirus is literally saved by the Bishop of Dryinoupolis, Mathaios, and the Bishop of Argyrokastro, Sofianos as well as by Nectarios Terpos. The presence and the contribution of St. Kosmas Aetolos prove to be catalytic. He travels around Epirus, and especially Northern Epirus, preaching the Word of Jesus Christ, building hundreds of schools, supporting people's hope, keeping the fire for Liberty burning, speaking of the "desirable" – that is, liberty –of Northern Epirus as well; something the Turk-Albanians never forgave him for, and hung him in Kolikondasi of Northern Epirus (close to Fieri) on 24.08.1779.

During the murky era of the Turkish occupation, the 80 monasteries of Northern Epirus were rendered not only famous worship places, but also centers of social welfare, national onsets, bases of operations, shelters for revolutionists and mostly centers of Greek education: most of the monasteries operated culture and arts schools. On the 18th century, Moschopolis in Korytsa was regarded as the "Athens of the North", having a "New Academy" and especially the only printing office in the greater Eastern area. It is there that the first Albanian (as well as Greek and Vlach) dictionary was printed. It should be noted that until then the Albanian did not exist as a written language. It is representative the fact that the first systematic attempts to put the Albanian language in written were made by the literate circles of the New Academy: the first Albanian alphabet was based on the Greek alphabet. However, it seems that the Albanians envied the brilliancy of Moschopolis, and burned it down...

The armed resistance of Epirus against the Turkish occupation is legendary: Souli, in Southern Epirus remained unoccupied for four centuries; Chimarra in Northern Epirus forced the Turks to yield its autonomy and special privileges. Northern Epirus proceeded in many revolutionary actions against the Turks. Also, in the Greek War of Independence in 1821, thousands of Northern Epirots actively participated. Still, Northern Epirus remained under slavery for one more century...

When, after the liberation, the small Greek State started being organized, once again the still enslaved Northern Epirots offered their assistance: the Great Benefactors Chr. Zografos (Kestorati of Argyrokastro), Ap. Arsakis (Hotahova of Premeti), Simon and Georgios Sinas (Moschopolis of Korytsa), Evaggelos and Konstantinos Zappas (Labovo

of Argyrokastró), Ioannis Bagkas (Korytsa) etc., built and donated to the Greek State the Athens' Observatory, the Arsakeia Schools, the Athens' Academy, the Zappeion Edifice – to mention some of the famous donations. Unfortunately, their villages are still abandoned by us, the modern Greeks...

In 1912 – '13, during the Balkan Wars, the Greek Army liberates along with Macedonia and Southern Epirus, the Northern Epirus region as well: from Chimarra to Korytsa. The "desirable" of St. Kosmas seemed to become a reality when, on December 1912, the Greek flag was put up in Korytsa...

However, the interests of the contemporary Great Powers prevailed: Under the initiative of Italy and Austrian-Hungary, the Albanian State was created out of nothing. To render the new state sustainable, they seize the free Northern Epirus to this new state by force. The Greek Northern Epirots rebel against this injustice. On 17 February 1914, they declare in Argyrokastró the INDEPENDENCE OF NORTHERN EPIRUS. A government is assigned with G. Zografos as Prime Minister, and Metropolitans Vassileios of Dryinoupolis, Spyridon of Vellas and Konitsa, and Germanos of Korytsa (photo), as members. The Northern Epirots start an armed struggle, without – unfortunately – the support of the Greek State. The revolution against the Albanian slavery succeeds, and on 17 May 1914 the Great Powers and Albania are forced to sign the CORCYRA PROTOCOL, i.e. THE INDEPENDENCE OF NORTHERN EPIRUS. The Sovereignty Government hands control over to the Greek Army in October 1914, which liberated Northern Epirus for the second time.

Unfortunately, the Albanians violated their promises: During the 1920's they managed to split the Orthodox Church from the Mother Church, the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and turn it into a tool of the Albanian nationalism. During the 1930's, king Zogou sets upon Greek Education, by closing schools down, persecuting teachers, parents and students. The Northern Epirots appeal to the Standing Court of International Justice (Hague) and are justified, while the Albanian State is forced to open the Greek Schools again. Still, strives against Greek Education did not cease during the Hozha government and up to nowadays.

In the early 1940's, Albania officially declared that all the enemies of Italy are considered to be Albania's enemies as well. On 28 October 1940, the Albanian army divisions, sided with fascistic Italy, attacked Greece. The victorious Greek Army once again triumphantly entered the Northern Epirus, welcomed as liberator by its people. But unfortunately, once again, the interests of the Great Powers wanted Northern Epirus enslaved to

Albania. After the end of the war, the Greek State asked from the Peace Council in Paris, and then from the Council of the (Four) Victorious Powers the concession of Northern Epirus to Greece. The discussion of the subject was postponed until the Austrian (1955) and the German (1990) issues were resolved. This appeal is still pending nowadays...

The retreat of the Greek Army in 1941 and the consequent occupation brought back the obscurity of slavery in Epirus. In Southern Epirus, Moslem Tsams collaborating with the conquerors proceeded to destructions, loots and slaughters. In Northern Epirus, the communist dictatorship of Hozha has been the worst slavery in the history of Hellenism: religion was illegal, and every religious action was penalized, Greek education was prosecuted, live barbwires on the boundaries and huge spotlights at the sea, turned Albania into an endless prison; thousands of people were executed or let to die imprisoned, anything reminding Jesus Christ and Greece was extinguished. Albania brutally strangled even the basic rights of the Northern Epirots.

In Greece, as years pass by, the reactions against the Albanian government increased. The Metropolitan of Dryinoupolis, Pogoniani and Konitsa Mr. Sevastianos, supported by P.A.N.E.R. – ΠΑ.ΣΥ.Β.Α. and S.C.C.N.E.R. – Σ.Φ.Ε.Β.Α., traveled around Greece, made appeals to International Organizations, organized conferences to awaken consciences, but also offering love and affection to hundreds of Northern Epirot and Albanian fugitives. And he was doing all this, while the official Greek State turned a deaf ear to the tragedy, keeping silent before the crimes committed, and moreover, trying to silence every voice of protest against Hozha's regime.

CHRISTMAS 1990: The Northern Epirots dare to celebrate Christmas, not long after Hozha's tyranny had come to an end. Members of S.C.C.N.E.R. – Σ.Φ.Ε.Β.Α., taking high risk, transferred sacred vessels, books and sacerdotal vestments for the Christmas Mass to Tirana, and from there, with the assistance of the Greek Embassy, to Dervitsani in Argyrokastro. That was the first open Holly Mass and the first Christmas celebrated after 24 years of persecution...

Nowadays, the one-party domination of communism no longer exists, but unfortunately, anti-Hellenism of the entire Albanian leadership has taken its place. The situation of Hellenism still remains tragic, Orthodoxy is not allowed to spread, Greek Education is being persecuted, schools are closing down while those still in operation are turned into Albanian schools, teachers are being threatened and persecuted so as not to teach the Greek language, OMONOIA os not allowed to participate in the national elections,

Northern Epirots are being dismissed from their jobs, gangs and extra-governmental mechanisms steal, destroy, terrify, murder; the Albanian police kills old people in cold blood, chases after young children, pointedly arrests and imprisons young Greeks; immigrants from Kosovo are transferred and take the jobs, properties and houses of the Northern Epirots who temporarily live in Greece; the Albanian state uses all means in order to force the Greeks out of the Northern Epirus...