


<p>Is Skanderbeg, the National Hero of Albanians, Present in the Paintings of Vittorio Carpaccio?!</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">History</p> <p>Keywords: immigration, paintings, religion, arbëror community, symbol, etc.</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;">Abstract</p> <p>There is yet no comprehensive and detailed study about the great presence of Arbëror community in the city and surroundings of Venice, in the Medieval period. A little has been written about these immigrants of Arbërore lands, about the circumstances while they left, the specific times of their movement to these areas, their social organizations in the new homeland, contributions in political, military, cultural and literary life, assimilation and the tracks they left behind, etc. In the beginnings of the fourteenth century, while the Ottoman invasions extended to the main areas of Arbërore territories, a considerable part of local population started to move to Italian coasts from the nearest Calabrian coasts to the territories of Italian Republics and kingdoms, such as: Ancona, Venice, Naples, Genoa, etc. Generally, the perception that massive immigrations of Albanian to the Italian peninsula occurred after the death of our national hero Gjergj Kastriotit Skënderbeu, fall of the Anti-Ottoman endurance and capitulation of Shkodra at the Ottomans by the Venetians, i.e. after the 1478.</p>		

WHEN DID THE FIRST ARBËRORE IMMIGRANTS MOVE TO VENICE?

The contacts of *Arbërore* world with Venetians date back to early years. They cover roots at least since the thirteenth century, the decade when this Republic boosted to its apex and consolidated the positions of a dominating marine power in the Adriatic, Mediterranean and beyond. Specifically in these centuries, the Venetians in expansion started to settle and to establish their colonies in the territories of the countries alongside the waters of the Ionian, Adriatic, Aegean and further. Their fortified coastal cities controlled the important marine paths, strategic crossings and the main lines for the transport of goods. They started from the Dalmat coast and included Tivar, Ulcinj, Parga, Corfu, further into the South in the Greek territories of Methonin, Koronin, Nafplion, Argosin, Negropontin, Ionian Islands, Kandian, etc. (*Siriol & Davis, 2007*)

Following such extension, the Venetians also managed to get, after harsh conflicts, several main coastal arbërore cities, such as Shkodra, Durrës, Ulcinj, Parga, Butrint, etc.

However, by the end of the fourteenth century, the relations and dominance of Venetian hegemony fluctuate and change by leaving the country to a new and aggressive increasing force – the Ottoman Empire. Turkish large military units, as well as formations started to threaten and conquer one after the other the cities and territories of the Balkan and beyond, the *Arbërore* ones. In these specific years, a part of the local population, which had resisted to Ottoman invasion started to leave its lands, mainly towards the West. (*Inalçuk, 2013*)

Numerous archive writings and documents inform us about massive immigrations of Albanians, after the Venetians gave the city of Shkodra to the Ottoman units and fall of Kruja. Huge immigrations of Albanians from these cities and regions to Venice, as it is known, belongs to the year 1479, a time in which the Republic of Venice signed the “Agreement of Peace” with the representatives of the Ottoman Empire and accepted that the Shkodra people besieged go through the immigration path in order to escape the Ottoman revenge. (*Akademia e Shkencave, 1982*)

In the work “Rrethimi i Shkodrës“, we find a full view and moving scenes about the vicissitudes of painful getaways and the receptions of Shkodra immigrants in the Republic of Venice. (*Barleti, 1974*)

Generally, the perception that massive immigrations of Albanian to the Italian peninsula occurred after the death of our national hero Gjergj Kastriotit Skënderbeu, fall of the Anti-Ottoman endurance and capitulation of Shkodra at the Ottomans by the Venetians, i.e. after the 1478.

However, when the great surge of Shkodra refugees arrived to this city, they found there another considerable presence of Albanians settled years or decades ago, within the city of Saint Mark and its surroundings.

ALBANIANS IN VENICE BEFORE THE BEGINNINGS OF SKANDERBEG RESISTANCE

Near the harbour of Venice, almost in the center of this city where they settled, the immigrants also found a school established by Albanians, at the gate of which it was positioned a marble tile with the denomination: - “Scuola S.a. Maria San Gallo di Albanesi”. This school started to be built since 1442 in San Severo, near the Monastery of San Gallo. (*Perrocco, 1981*)

Referring to “Shkollës së Shqiptarëve” (“The School of Albanians”), definitely, it may be concluded that the necessity for its establishment was dictated – first of all by the presence of a great community of Albanians and along with them a great presence of their children. It is obvious that this presence has dictated the necessity to establish an institution for the education and cultural formation of the immigrated youth. Only this fact, the investment to establish in this important and financially expensive center, an educational institution gives us the right to conclude that this community did not belong to a group of immigrants without interests, without civilization and without claims for the standards of elitary, cultural, educational and city life.

On the contrary, the construction of this school and along with it, of three churches for Albanians – the San Gallo Church, - the San Mauricio Church and Shën Gjergji Church (*Perrocco, 1981*) show clearly not only the presence of this community, but also the high cultural and civil level it enjoyed. We should remember that religious institutions, churches in Medieval times were centers not only for the realization of spiritual, religious needs, but also significant shelter of art, culture, politics and important centers for the collection and association of different national communities.

“SHKOLLA E SHQIPTARËVE” (“The School of Albanians”) (“*Scuola degli Albanesi*”)

In the beginnings of the fourteenth century, while the Ottoman invasions extended to the main areas of Arbërore territories, a considerable part of local population started to move to Italian coasts from the nearest Calabrian coasts to the territories of Italian Republics and kingdoms, such as: Ancona, Venice, Naples, Genoa, etc. An immigration location and a massive shelter, yet not well-studied, seems obviously to have been the city of Venice. The Italian researcher Perrocco informs us that “The increase of the number of Albanian immigrants, under the pressure of the Ottomans made their presence very sensible in this city. (*Perrocco, 1981*)

Even though we do not find yet an accurate date when its construction works were completed, there is no doubt that from the very beginnings (1442) at least within two decades (maybe earlier) the construction of this object should have been completed. We say this since this “School” is not a public building with very large dimensions or difficult architecture, which would require a great involvement for construction materials, labour power and masters selected for its realization. For these reasons, we consider that at the time of the second migratory surge (after the fall of Shkodra, 1470-1480) the school has been completed. (*Perrocco, 1981*)

A few years later, after the end of construction, maybe before the end of this century (the fifteenth), a rather interesting event would accompany the history of this school, an occurrence which would leave tracks in that time and would continue to radiate to present day.

VITTORIO CARPACCIO DEDICATED PAINTINGS TO THE “SCHOOL OF ALBANIANS”

“Meanwhile he was working on several paintings in the premises of “Scuola degli Schiavoni”, a school established by the immigrants from the coasts of Dalmatia, Carpaccio was called to work on a cycle of works dedicated to the life of the “Virgin Mary”, about the “School of Albanians”, -as the well-known Italian researcher

of Renaissance, Guido Perocco, informs us. (Valcanover, 2007) Referring to such historical fact, several questions arise naturally which should receive responses:

- Who was the painter and what did he represent so that he undertook to offer to the “School of Albanians” a cycle of paintings?

- Which were the motives that encouraged the great and famous painter of the Italian renaissance to offer his creations to a small school, of a distant immigration into such an important metropol of the Medieval world?

- What did the creations represented, what was the topic of Carpaccio’s painting and to whom were they dedicated to.

Since the beginnings, it should be stated that the great painter, Vittorio (Viktor) Carpaccio, is among the most well-known founders of the Italian Renaissance and the author who left obvious tracks behind in the trend of humanist art of the time. He was the student of another great Italian painter, Xhovani Belini. He worked an infinite number of works which, nowadays are distributed in the most renowned museums across the world, from the Metropolitan Museum in New York to “Brera” in Milan, from Louvre in Paris, in Tratzakov in Russis, from Venice to Pradon in Spain and so on. (*Melissa, 1988*)

As for his origin, there are many dilemmas. A number of writings and authors state that he was the son of a Venetian trader of Koperi origin, some others state his Venetian origin, while a number of authors claim the Albanian origin of the famous painter. However, it should be stated that, even though we do not have a comprehensive, serious and scientific research about the rational identity of Carpaccio, there exist many indications and documents which approximate the origin of this painter to Arbërore coasts.

For this, let us return to the work of Carpaccio, to the “School of Albanians” in order to larify some of the above dilemmas.

“THE VIRGIN OF SHKODRA”, (“LADY OF GOOD COUNCIL”) INSPIRATION AND TOPIC OF CARPACCIO’S PAINTINGS!!!

The Italian researcher and encyclopedist of the eighteenth century, Anton Maria Zanetti, who studied Venetian paintings in general and works of Vittorio Carpaccio in particular, in his studies and publication entitled “Della Pittura Veneta”, referring to the topic of his paintings “School of Albanians” informs us about a rather interesting fact. He states that: “The selection of topic for this series, which was sent in the “School of Albanians”, with the life histories of the Virgin is clearly a homage about the “Virgin of Shkodra”, the lady, the defender of Albania”(Zanetti, Maria, 1771) Hence, Zaneti states clearly that Carpaccio had, not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a topic of treatment and dedication in his paintings A Saint, a symbol of Shkodra and Albania, what he calls the “Virgin of Shkodra” or, as we use it today “Lady of Good Council”.

But, what did the “Virgin of Shkodra” represent?

“The Virgin” or the “Lady of Shkodra” (Madonna) is a tableau, a painting which presents Saint Mary holding her son, Jesus, an infant, in her hands. This tableau in oil or icon, (yet not studied by critics) should have been created before the fourteenth century or in the first years of this century. Unfortunately, its author remains anonymous to this day. Across all the decades of the fifteenth century, this tableau (icon) was set and found inside a small church of old Shkodra, at the foot of the mountain where the castle of Rozafa was located. The residents of Shkodra city and beyond used to beg before it and honoured the portrait of Saint Mary in painting, as their defensive saint.

According to the legend that comes from distant years, it is stated that;

“In 1467, when the Ottoman bodies held Shkodra surrounded and threatened to desecrate church, the painting was miraculously detached from the wall, left the building and started to fly towards the west on the Adriatic sea to Italy. Two Albanian migrants followed the move of this icon, Gjergji and Sclavisi. The portrait in

painting of the Virgin Lady came to settle in the city of Genazzano near Roma, where a church was established in its honour, The Church of the “Lady of the Good Council” (La Chiesa della Madonna del Buon Consiglio).

There is no doubt that the above event narrates a reality of times, but naturally the truth is coated with the attire of myth and mysticism. *In fact, the icon of the “Lady of the Good Council” was taken from the walls of Shkodra church by those who were taking the path of immigration towards Italy as a Saint that would protect them in the road full of immigration vicissitudes towards the Italian coasts.*

In *Arbëreshe* territories, in the Southern Italy, it is found a tableau which narrates about this painting, which leads the caravan of immigrants to Italy. (Hudhri, 2012)

Definitely, to this important religious and spiritual symbol, also national and historical, for the whole exile of Albanians in the territories of the Republic of Venice, would be dedicated the four tableaus, which would be worked by the famous painter of Italian Renaissance, Vittorio Carpaccio and would be settled in the main hall of the “School of Albanians” in the city of Venice.

THE PAINTINGS OF CARPACCIO DEDICATED TO THE “SCHOOL OF ALBANIANS” AND THEIR DESTINY

Specifically to this symbol, the “Virgin of Shkodra”, the saint of Albanians, Vittorio Carpaccio dedicated four interesting paintings, which were placed on the four wall areas in the hall of this school. They are entitled as follows:

- “Birth of the Virgin”, (“Natività della Vergine”, 128×137 cm) **(Tableau 1)**

- “Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple”, (“Presentazione della Vergine al Tempio”, 130x137), **(Tableau 2)**

- “Miracle of the Virgin”, (“Miracolo della verga fiorita” - o “Sposalizio della Vergine”), 130x140 cm **(Tableau 3)**

- “Evangelization”, (“Annunciazione”, 130x140 cm), **(Tableau 4)**

Hence, as it is obvious, the four paintings are linked with the life of the “Virgin of Shkodra or Saint of Albanians”. Definitely, the topic is biblical, because the whole art of the time had to approach topics related to christianism and holy works which are described in the bible. This was a norm and standard of the time, this was respected by all the other painters of the time starting from Michelangelo – Kapela Sistina, Xhorxhone, Donatelo, Rafaelo, El Greko, etc.

However, looking and observing carefully the characters of this painting, our attention is drawn by the portrait of an old-aged man, always in profile, who is present not only in one, but in many paintings of the painter, as well as at those paintings which are dedicated to the “School of Albanians”! This character, strangely at first sight, creates the impact that he is our national hero, Skanderbeg. (See the character in the following paintings).

A CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN THE PAINTINGS OF CARPACCIO – SKANDERBEG

If we refer to our national hero and paintings dedicated to him, which come to us from the Medievalism, it is very strange but true, that the painters of that time have always brought it almost always in profile only!!! We mention herein those pictures of medievalism of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries which are deemed to be authentic and approach us perhaps more to the accurate and direct image of our national hero, ranging from engravings featuring the hero in the work of M. Barleti; the portrait of Skanderbeg realized at the gate of the house in Rome, where he stayed; the well-known picture of the Italian painter C. Altissimo; the portrait of Skanderbeg in the engravings of the painter D. Custos, etc. (Hudhri, 2012)

Surprisingly, even this character of Carpaccio’s works, is found in paintings of different topics, but always in profile! (See the pictures 1, 2, 3, 4)

- At his portrait, it draws our attention his iconic and characteristic nose entirely similar to that of our hero, curved, hanging down, below the nose his white beard, gray as we find it in many paintings of the authors of that time.

- Another special feature that reinforces the conviction that the person that is introduced in some of Carpaccio's pictures is our national hero, is also another detail, the cap he is wearing in his head, which was estimated to be the characteristic cap worn by the *Stratiots*, the Albanian fighters of medieval ages. (We wish to clarify in this case the fact that the *Stratiots* in Middle Ages were in majority, if not all, Albanians. They consisted of regular formations of fighters, who were battling against the Ottoman conquest, in the Venetian possessions - mainly through Greek territories - but after the conquest of the Balkans, they served to Venetians in other fronts and territories, across Italy or even beyond, across Europe.)

- In one of the paintings, dedicated to the "School of Albanians", entitled "Mariage (presentation) of the Virgin" (See the image no. 4) in the center, it is found a character in profile, who, again, looks like our hero and not only this, but his entire garment is completely different compared to the whole Venetian costumography of the and the entire decor of the characters in the paintings of Carpaccio. As everyone may see, it is rather similar, not to state that it contains the sufficient elements of the characteristic folk garment of Arbërore regions. No other painting of Carpaccio or other Venetian painters presents characters with such a garment! We find this only at Carpaccio and only in one painting placed at the "School of Albanians" and dedicated to Albanians!

- As per above, for the whole European opinion, as well as for Carpaccio, the image of our national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu has become a symbol of resistance against the Ottoman threat. The Pope himself had proclaimed him "a knight and defender of christianism". Being such an image, the symbol or the presence of Skanderbeg not only was aimed at, but also was reflected in the literature of the time (Barleti, 1974) so there is no reason not to be in visual arts, in painting, furthermore in premises attended by Albanians, as it was the "School of Albanians" or other premises of religious character, where the Albanians were donors.

- From 1470 to 1550, in the city of Venice a climate of admiration and special emotion existed about wars and Anti-Ottoman resistance of Albanians and their national hero. It was such a climate which inspired great painters of Italian Renaissance, such as: Xhovani Belinin, Paulo Veronezen who worked on paintings with such subjects. At the entrance of the "School of Albanians", was located a relief which revoked the glorious times of Shkodra's resistance (relief in marble, which is found nowadays in the entrance facade of the School). Precisely at this temple of Albanian knowledge and under such emotional climate, it would be impossible that within its walls, in the paintings that addressed to the Albanians not be reflected the symbol image of such resistance - Skanderbeg.

- If, we would add up to the above facts the data or claims that the famous painter, Carpaccio originated from Arbërore territories, this would make it more convenient the assumption about the presence of Skanderbeg in the creations of this great painter of Italian Renaissance. Furthermore, we would deem that other more detailed studies about his life and work would provide more subjects, dedications and why not in the presence of the Albanian element and subjects.

We should remind that by the end of the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Venice had a large presence of Albanian refugees, who had arrived not only from the territories of Arbëria, but also Arvanitas, who had moved from Venetian settlements to the territories of Greece (Methoni, Koroni, Nafplio, Argosi, Mani, etc.) This large Arbëror community produced by then, as known, a large number of well-known personalities in the battle-fields, such as: Mërkur Bua, Krokodil Kladha, Meksi, Buziqi, Basta, etc; reputable for their mind and pen, such as: Marin Barleti, Beçikemi, Gjon Buzuku, Manol Blesi, etc, (Mpiris, 1974) who are among the most distinguished humanists of the time. The image of Skanderbeg to all of them, as well as for the entire community of Albanian immigrants was the symbol and myth of their dreams and hopes, therefore this hero was found everywhere in their folk songs, creations and literature and he could not be left out of the works of the painters in that time.

Let us hope and believe that in the future other data will come to light on this subject and many unknown aspects and values of the Albanian contribution will be enlightened in the world of the Western art.



“Birth of the Virgin”, Bergamo – Carrara Academy



“Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple”, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera



“Marriage (presentation) of the Virgin”, Pinacoteca di Brera



“Evangelization”, Venezia, Galleria Franchetti della Ca' d'Oro

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