

Artistic craftsmanship in Albania during xviii-xix century stone carvers, wood carver and iconographic painters

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Abstract

This paper deals with the activity of Albanian craftsmen during the 18th and 19th centuries in the Ottoman period in Albania. The movement of craftsmen was often dictated by circumstantial conditions and by the needs of the Ottoman state for craftsmen. Moreover, this paper aims to present some issues related to the names of artisans, as well as some of artistic features of their work, which makes their style unique. Their movements with ateliers in the Balkans and towards the Ottoman Empire territory affected the emerging of new elements in folk art. These craft masters were the best distributors of stone carving and stone processing.

Keywords: craftsmanship, folk art, art, ottoman empire

Introduction

The XVIII century marks the growth of Albanian cities, as well as the vast development of economy and culture. The close relations between cities, the internal migration of the population, the imposed or dictated circulation of the people indicated by the political forces of the time, the ongoing contacts with the Balkan countries, as well as having Istanbul as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, brought about cultural, social and economic exchanges, which were reflected in the development of craftsmen in Albania during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Today's available data on craftsmanship established in Albania are disclosed thanks to various scholars, also obtained through inscriptions traced on objects or otherwise discovered during study expeditions. One of the difficulties we often face is that such data is often collected from legends, which are not fully reliable. As far as the lives, origin and works of such craftsmen are concerned, there is an issue faced regarding the historical aspect of handling such studies. The difficulty stands not only in the limited data but also in their names, which are often found the names of Dhimitri and Constantine, such as: Dhimitri from Konica, Dhimitër Korçari, Dhimitër Koleci, etc. Another important aspect is whether the masters were given their surnames based on their country of origin or perhaps based on where they exercised their activity. This aspect should be also studied for the case of iconographic painters. What happens with the iconographers is that they change their name after becoming monks, as in the case of Dhimiter Anagnosti, son of Mihal Anagnosti, after becoming a monk he was named Daniel ^[1]. The same we may think about Onuphri, the Cypriot. Theopan Popa is the first one to provide the hypothesis that the Cypriot could be of Cyprus origin, if he was indeed from Cyprus or worked there. Whereas regarding Onuphri, exercising a broad activity in Berat in the XVI century, other scholars think his origins is from the village of Shpat in Elbasan ^[2] or even from Venice ^[3]. The highest level of stone-craft and wood craft was achieved in the XIX century, where the driving masters of Dibra, Opar, Korca, Voskopoja, Grabova, Extend their activity in many areas

within and outside of Albania. Cities such as Elbasan, Dibra, Bitola, Korça, Konitsa (Greece), Ioaninna (Greece), Gjirokastra, Voskopoja and villages like Opar and Grabova, during the 18th and 19th centuries, had cultural links and economic exchanges on a continuous basis.

The highest level of stone and wood craftsmanship was achieved in the 19th century, where traveling workshops of the craftsmen of Dibra, Opar, Korca, Voskopoja, and Grabova stretched their activity in many areas within Albania as well as abroad.

The scholar Suraiya Faroqhi points out some interesting facts about Albanian workers in the 18th century in Istanbul. This is interesting not only for the fact that the data during these centuries are poor, but also because the researcher highlights that another feature was that these workers were mostly Albanians. This is the case of a construction in the early 18th century in the town of Hotin, Ukraine ^[4]. Faroqhi writes that the selected Albanians, mostly Orthodox Christians of a young age, considerable numbers, were selected by Dhimiter Kallfa 60 Albanian workers, whereas some other stone craftsmen were selected by a person named Jovan Arnauti ^[5].

Referring to their names, the author also concludes that most of the workers were Albanians. Their professions were stone craftsmen, decorators, painters, etc. It is still unknown whether they were employed in these jobs because Albanian masters had established a good name in Istanbul or whether because they were hired from the person named Jovan Arnauti. The data disclosed by the author show that the participation of Albanians of Orthodox religion was very large. It may be assumed that professions such as stone craftsmen could have been undertaken by Orthodox Albanians, who might have been granted a permit to exercise the profession. This case may also show the policies of the Ottoman Empire being imposed on the movements of masters and craftsmen.

J. V. Hann mentions that the people from Lunxheria had some privileges provided by Sultan's firman, to whom they provided the freedom to exercise their professions thanks to their craft skills. According to him, in Istanbul and its surroundings, around 6,000 Epirus ^[6] craftsmen worked. Many residents of

Lunxheria immigrated to Istanbul to earn and secure the future. One of the professions widespread among the Albanians was the gardeners' profession, and oral tradition say that people from Lunxheria used garden flowers to adorn their courtyards or family tradition special drink recipes, which came from Istanbul. Various professions and crafts, such as gardening, Istanbul's street maintenance, etc., were identified as typical professions for Albanians in the 20th century and these were often called the Albanian pavement ^[7].

Some aspects of construction, such as the type of material, the decoration of the dwelling gates with decorative elements and built with large stones, maintenance of the tower, shall be considered as a tradition in the houses of Epirus but also as a characteristic of the Albanian dwellings in some areas of Albania, as well as in the northern part. The style of construction and ornaments used in the outer arch of the entrances has been described as a tradition commonly used in churches and houses in Epirus. Two houses of the old Konica family are the residential complex of Ali Pasha's mother and Faik Konica's dwelling, built around the XVIII-XIX centuries. Both dwellings are stone-built, equipped with a tower and arches on the gate. Due to security reasons, the dwelling of Ali Pasha's mother had a secret entrance and many turrets, to be protected from frequent attacks ^[8]. Such protective elements are also in Gjirokastra, in the dwelling of Zekat and Skëndulaj. Another widespread workmanship in some of the cities of Albania was the carving and wood works. Around the XVIII and XIX centuries, artisans such as: Dhimitër Korçari (Koleci, originally from Shkodra), who worked the iconostasis of the church of St. John Vladimir in Elbasan; Petro Filipi, who performed iconostasis in Elbasan and Diber, Nikola Dibrani (originally from Bitola, Macedonia today) who performed the iconostasis of the church of St. Mary in Sopik, Gjirokastra, which was engraved as ordered by Ali Pasha Tepelena; the Konica masters, including Dhimitri from Konica, who crafted some iconostasis in Vithkuq, Korça, Përmet, Labovë e Kryqit, St. Miter of Peshkopia and middle Albania ^[9] and many others who worked in various private and public buildings and dwellings, as well as cult objects, carved mosque ceilings, church iconostases, ceilings and mosaics of dwellings. In addition to the Byzantine elements and figures associated to cult sites used in the decoration of the church's iconostasis, Konica masters used elements of floral and geometrical motifs, as well as the rosette, star, and other motifs also used from Dibra craftsman and other wood craftsmen.

Master Dhimitër Korçari conveyed his experience while he worked in Hilandar, to other masters, such as Petro Filipi ^[10]. The carpenter master Petro Filipi from Dibra e Madhe, carved the iconostasis of the monastery church dedicated to John, the Precursor in Dibra e Madhe (Macedonia) and iconostasis of the "St. Mary" church in Elbasan fortress, realized around the second decade of the XIX century. In both iconostases, Petro Filipi worked alongside his ateliers for their realization. Both ateliers, the wood carving, together with painters and iconographers from Epirus in Samarina, Mihal Anagnosti and his son Dhimitri or Daniel, named after becoming monk, cooperated in the realization of the two churches in Diber and Elbasan.

Mihal Anagnosti realized the murals and icons of the iconostasis of the monastery church of John, the Precursor in Dibra e Madhe, as well as icons of the iconostasis of the church of St. Mary in Elbasan. In the iconostasis of the

monastery church dedicated to John, the Precursor, in Dibra e Madhe, his master and atelier appeared for the first time. This is considered a novelty in the works of the church objects. Unlike the other iconostasis whereby floral motifs and symbols of the Eucharist were generally engraved, a collective portrait of the engraving atelier is carved in this iconostasis. Master Petro is carved in this scene, where he puts his finger on his head, representing himself as a creator and designer. Whereas the other members are presented while working with their work tools placed on the desk.

The high relief carved iconostasis creates contrasting shades and light, which are accompanied by different details and scenes from old prints, as well as floral decorative motifs, symbols of the Eucharist distinguished for high artistic level. Fortunately, the iconostasis was saved the monastery's burning in September 2009. As for its craft, it resembles the engraving technique of the beautiful door of the church in Elbasan Fortress. These similarities are observed in the flow of curved lines and large curls found in this art work.

In the iconography pavilion in the National Historic Museum, several icons of Mihal Anagnosti are exhibited, originating from the church of St. Mary in the Elbasan fortress, as well as the beautiful door of the church iconostasis. This beautiful door or otherwise called the royal gate is carved by Master Philip and painted by the iconographer Mihal Anagnosti. Over this gate, can be distinguished some symbols of the Eucharist, Seraphim images, carved eagles and carved roses, flower vases with pinecones. Everything is carved with high relief technique mastery, highlighting the light-shade contrast. The iconographer Mihal Anagnosti painted the Annunciation scene, where Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is expecting a child.

The iconography painters like Onuphri and Nikola, the Zografi brothers and their sons, the Çetiri brothers and their sons, Mihal Anagnosti with his son Dhimitri, show that the profession of iconographer, mural decorators and icon painter was often a family tradition. This is noticed in the painters of the Gramoz area, where the workshops were established within their families and were inherited from generation to generation, preserving a system within the family. Generally speaking, these painters decorated public and private objects, with religious or secular scenes which reflect some special stylistic forms, whereby the motifs of the late Ottoman Baroque adorn the walls, chimneys, and musandras, as well as in the Skëndulaj dwelling, Zekate dwelling in Gjirokastra, as well as the roof decorations of Helvetive Tekke in Berat ^[10].

Decorative ornaments with flower vases were decorations which adorned the wooden panels interiors within the residences of the Pasha's in the XVIII century in Istanbul, or elsewhere around the empire. It is worth mentioning the residence living room on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, of Amcazade Hussein Pasa, a vizier of Köprülü Dynasty, or the Fruit Chamber at the Topkapı Palace, built in 1705 in honor of Sultan Ahmad III ^[11]. Each panel was painted differently, as noted in the wall paintings of Zekate's dwelling, where each part of the mural paintings depicts a vase of flowers decorated differently. Painters and decorators who had frequent contacts with Istanbul may have brought such elements and decorative styles to wall paintings, adapting them to the needs, aesthetic tastes, and local techniques of the town and owners of such dwellings.

The roads crossed by such craftmasters to move towards other cities consolidated the cultural ties between them. On the other hand, their movements with ateliers in the Balkans and towards the Ottoman Empire territory affected the emerging of new elements in folk art. Exposed to the opportunity to move and work, such masters were the best distributors of stone carving and stone processing. Similar stylistic and aesthetic forms of their works are distinguished in many buildings and facilities from the north of Albania to the southern part, reflecting the high artistic level achieved by such craftsmen in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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