THE CHRISTIAN SAINTS OF ALBANIA

by Robert Elsie

The present compendium of information focuses on the historical evolution of the cults of Christian saints who were particularly revered in Albania, endeavouring thus to throw light on some of the cultural peculiarities of traditional Christian faith in that country.

When dealing with Christianity and its long history in Albania, it is essential to distinguish from the start between Christianity on Albanian soil and Christianity among the Albanians as a people. Albania was in fact one of the earliest countries of Europe to come into contact with Christianity and it has a particularly long and diverse history with this faith. We know that there were relatively early Christian settlements along the Illyrian coast. First to have preached the gospel in Albania may have been Saint Paul himself who states, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." (Romans 15:19). The apostle Andrew is also believed to have preached in Epirus. There were at any rate a number of Christian families living in the port of Durrës in 58 A.D. and by the fourth to fifth centuries, Christianity had left recognizable traces throughout the country.

Christian bishops from Dardania and Macedonia Salutare, i.e. dignitaries from the present eastern Albania and Kosova, are known to have been among those who took part in the first Ecumenical Council, which was convened in Nicaea in 325 A.D. by the Emperor Constantine (r. 307-337 A.D.), among other things in order to stem the rise of Arianism in the empire. There were also five or six bishops from Dardania, New Epirus and Old Epirus at the Council of Sardica in 343-344 A.D. Half a century later, in 395, Illyrian Albania was among the first parts of the empire to feel the initial cleft between Eastern Rome and Western Rome, for it found itself from the very start on the cultural and political border between the Byzantine East and the Italian West. It drew and benefited from both cultures but also suffered immensely over the centuries from conflicts between the two halves of the empire. In actual fact, we know little about the early Christian Church in Albania since all the ecclesiastical structures there may have been were swept away with the Slavic invasion and settlement of Albania around the year 600. The following Dark Ages in Albania were dark indeed.

The history of saints in Albania begins with a number of early Christian martyrs who were either active in the country or who had some sort of connection to it. These saints were not, however, Albanians in the ethnic sense. The first of them was Saint Astius, Albanian Shën Asti, Bishop of Durrës at the time of the Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 A.D.). During this period, many Christians fled to Albania to escape persecution in Italy. Among them were the seven holy martyrs: Peregrin, Lucian, Pompey, Hesychias, Papias, Saturninus and Germanus, who, upon arrival, were arrested, thrown into chains and subsequently drowned in the Adriatic Sea. Astius himself was arrested by the Roman governor of Durrës, Agricola, around the year 98 A.D. and was tortured to death, apparently for refusing to worship the God Dionysus. His feast day is July 6. Even less well known is the legend of Saints Florus and Laurus from Constantinople. Florus worked as a stonemason in Illyria and was tortured with his companion Laurus and his employees Proculus and Maximus for having assisted in the construction of a Christian church. He was thrown into a well and died some time in the second century. Certain authors associate Florus and Laurus with the ancient settlement of Ulpiana, south of Prishtina in Kosova. Their feast day is August 18. Saint Eleutherius, Albanian Shën Lefter, was originally from Rome and was made bishop of Messina and Illyria when he was a mere twenty years old. He appears to have lived in Vlora. We do not know much about him other than the fact that he was called back to Rome around the years 117120 and was martyred together with his mother, **Saint Anthia**, Albanian *Shën Anthi*, and eleven companions during a wave of anti-Christian persecution under the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138 A.D.). His feast day is April 18. **Saint Therinus**, Albanian *Shën Therin*, of the ancient settlement of Butrint, now in southern Albania, was slain with a number of other martyrs under the reign of Emperor Decius (r. 249-250) in the third century. His feast day is April 23, like that of Saint George. Finally, we know of one **Saint Donat**, Albanian *Shën Donat*, also of Butrint, who lived during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius (r. 379-394). According to the fifth-century Greek historian Sozomen, Donat was Bishop of Evorea or Euria, which we can probably identify with the town of Paramythia in Epirus. Many miracles are attributed to him. He slew a dragon, purified a poisoned well, saved the emperor's daughter from the devil and revived the dead. He died in 387. Saint Donat's remains were transferred to Kassiopi on Corfu in 602 to save them from barbarian invasions which were feared at the time. This led subsequently to a problem of jurisdiction and custody for the holy relics, a dispute which was solved by Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590-604). Donat's cult was widespread in the middle ages. His feast day is April 30.

The early history of Christianity is of no particular significance for the cultural history of the Albanian people themselves, in particular since there are no credible traces of the Albanians during this period and indeed during the next five centuries. There were a number of Christian settlements along the Albanian coast, in Durrës, Apollonia, Butrint and Vlora, but these had little contact, if any, with the indigenous population in the mountains. Such settlements were and, up to the Turkish occupation, remained colonies inhabited by Italians, Greeks, Venetians, Dalmatians, Slavs, Jews and Armenians, but, it would seem, by hardly any Albanians. The transhumant Albanian herdsmen obviously felt better off in the safety of their mountains.

As has been indicated above, one must distinguish between Christianity in Albania and Christianity among the Albanians, just as one must distinguish between the history of Albania and the history of the Albanians. With all due comprehension for the aspirations of Albanian nationalism, it must be said that the endeavours of some Albanian scholars to interpret anything and everything in centuries past as having been of Albanian nationality has only been to the detriment of Albanian scholarship. Names have appeared in the Albanian press of historical figures who were "most certainly Albanian" or at least "probably Albanian." These range from Alexander the Great to Ataturk. To speak of Saint Astius, Saint Donat or Saint Therinus, or even worse, to speak of Saint Jerome, born in Stridon in present-day Slovenia, or of Saint Martin of Tours, born in Sabaria (Szombathely), Hungary, as being Albanian is pure nonsense.

There do not seem to be any Albanian saints, in the purely ethnic sense of the term, and this is quite understandable since both Christianity and Islam were imported goods, so to speak. With the arrival of these great religions came the saints, also imported from abroad. The Albanian tribes were converted over the course of time, though only, it seems, very superficially. Religious fervour was never widespread among them. Italian monks and missionaries no doubt brought with them the cults of the saints traditionally revered by their orders, e.g. Franciscan saints for Franciscan monks, etc. Nonetheless, it is evident that the faithful, i.e. the Albanians being converted, would end up having their own preferences among the saints and, with time, would come to make their own choices. There are, in fact, a number of Christian saints who were particularly venerated by the Albanians over the centuries, figures who fitted so well into the patterns of popular belief in the country that they came to be regarded as native. It is at this point that the history of saints in Albania becomes particularly relevant to the Albanians as a people. Why were some saints revered by the Albanians while others fell into oblivion? The definitive answer to this question may be given one day by church historians and ethnologists. For the moment, we may content ourselves with observing which saints the Albanians particularly revered.

Let us return to the first decades of the seventeenth century, to the period just before the Albanians, for easily understandable reasons, converted in great numbers to Islam. In his monograph *Geografia Ecclesiastica dell'Albania* published in 1934, the Jesuit scholar and great Albanologist Fulvio Cordignano (1887-1951) listed about 275 Catholic churches which existed in Albania some time between the final decades of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century. These churches were named after a variety of Christian saints, over forty in all, but on closer inspection we see that over half of the churches of the period bore the names of only four saints: the Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas, Saint Veneranda and Saint George.

The most common of all the saints in Albania was the **Virgin Mary**, Albanian *Shën Mëri*. The cult of the Blessed Virgin arose in Western Europe in the High Middle Ages when a need became felt for a female counterpart, a goddess so to speak, to the traditionally male god of the Christian church. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano, 42 were dedicated to Saint Mary, more than to any other saint. There were historical Catholic churches in: Ulcinj (now Montenegro), Shurdhah SH, Deja SH, Drisht SH being the *capitulum ecclesie S. Marie de Drivasto* recorded in 1353, Naraç SH, Hajmel SH, Renc LE, Fishta LE, Troshan LE, Kalivaç LE, Lezha LE, Mërtur PU, Surroj KU, Shpërdhaza MR, Malaj MR, Ndërshena MR, Ndërfana MR, Lura DI, Çidhna DI, Gur i Bardhë MT, Sebasta LA, Mbret LA, Kurcaj KR, Cape Rodoni DR recorded in 1418, Brar TR dating from the twelfth century, Skuterra TR, Pëllumbas TR, Buçimas TR, Linza TR and Bishqem PE.

There were also many Orthodox churches and monasteries devoted to the Blessed Virgin, among which those in: Berat dating from 1797, Peshtan BR, Elbasan from 1833, Ardenica LU, Apollonia (Pojan) FR from the early thirteenth century, Dhërmi VL from the thirteenth to fourteenth century, Dhiver SR dating from 1604, Peca SR dating from 1770, Pigeras SR dating from 1672, Nivicë-Bubar SR dating from the seventeenth century, Malçan SR dating from ca. 1600, Marmiro near Orikum VL from the early tenth century, Kameno northeast of Delvina, Zvërnec VL from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, Goranxia GJ from ca. 1600, Vllaho-Goranxia GJ dating from 1622, Koshovica GJ dating from 1669, Saraqinishta GJ dating from 1634, Nivan GJ dating from 1702, Koncka GJ dating from 1789, Dhuvjan GJ, Llongo GJ, Treneshishta GJ, Vanistër GJ, Peshkëpi GJ from the early tenth century, Zervat GJ originally from the early tenth century, Labova e Krygit GJ from the late tenth century, Skora GJ dating from 1773, Sopik GJ dating from 1770, Leusa PR dating from 1812, Kosina PR from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, Seranjperat PR from the seventeenth century, Leskovik ER, Barmash ER dating from 1616, Postenan ER dating from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, Lashova ER dating from the eighteenth century, Voskopoja KO from 1712, Vithkuq KO from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, Maligrad on Lake Prespa dating from 1345, Pogradec, Nica PG dating from the eighteenth century, and Lin PG.

The Virgin Mary was venerated in particular during pilgrimages on her feast day, August 15, the Day of the Assumption, known in Albanian as *Shën Mëri e Gushtit*. The Orthodox celebrate this day as the Feast of the Dormition, Alb. *Fjetja e Shën Mërisë*, formerly marked on August 27 according to the eastern calendar, but now on August 15 according to the Gregorian calendar. Some pilgrimages in her honour involved long climbs up mountain peaks, remnants of earlier pre-Christian cults: Mount Tomor, Mount Gjalica near Kukës, Mount Shën Llesh near Kruja, Mount Këndrevica in Kurvelesh, and Mount Pashtrik on the border between Albania and Kosova. Pjetër Bogdani (ca. 1630-1689) describes the celebrations on the latter mountain in 1681 as follows:

"They spend all the night there, with drums, whistles, dancing and singing. After midnight they begin a mixed procession - Moslems, Serbs and Greeks with lighted wax candles, their length proportionate to each person's age. They walk round the peak of the highest mountain for three hours in bare feet (with some of the leading Moslems on

horseback).1,,

In Central Albania, sterile women used to travel to the beaches of Kavaja and Durrës and bathe in the sea there. This custom, by which the women hoped to become pregnant, was followed discreetly even during the communist dictatorship. In Selta, in the Shpat region of central Albania, a cow was sacrificed on this feast day.

In the village of Bibaj in Upper Reka (Macedonia), Saint Mary in the Winter, Alb. *Shën Mëria e Dimrit*, was celebrated by Orthodox Albanians on December 4. The Orthodox Albanians in Albania itself mark this feast, also known as the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin into the Temple, on November 21 in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. It was tradition on that day for candles to be lit and bread to be baked, blessed by a priest and then eaten

Also in Upper Reka, in the village of Senca (Sence), there was a feast of Little Saint Mary, Alb. *Shën Mëria e Vogël*, ~ Romanian *Sfânta Maria Mică*, Aromanian *Stămărie N'ică*, which commemorates the birth of the Virgin Mary and is observed on September 21 according to the eastern calendar and now more commonly on September 8 according to the western Gregorian calendar. This day is also known as Bee Day, Alb. *Dita e bletëve*, being the time of year for buying and selling bee hives. The Gruda tribe and the town of Shkodra celebrated this feast of the Virgin Mary on September 8, whereas the inhabitants of Vukël and Nikç MM honoured the Virgin on May 24.

The Virgin Mary was venerated within the Catholic church in Albania in particular as Our Lady of Shkodra or the Madonna of Shkodra, Alb. *Zoja e Shkodrës* (Lady of Shkodra) or *Zoja e bekueme* (Blessed Lady), also known as the Mother of Good Counsel. The feast of the Madonna of Shkodra was marked by all of the Catholic tribes of the north. The fourth council of Albanian bishops, held in 1895, proclaimed Our Lady of Shkodra the 'Patron of Albania.' There is a legend connected to the Our Lady of Shkodra:

The Madonna was originally in a little church in old Shkodra at the foot of the Rozafat citadel, where her image was venerated by Catholics in the form of an oil painting. In 1467, when Ottoman troops were laying siege to Shkodra and threatening to desecrate the church, the painting miraculously detached itself from the wall, left the building and flew off in a westwardly direction over the Adriatic Sea to Italy. It was followed by two Albanian pilgrims, Gjorgji and De Sclavis. The image of the Virgin finally came to rest in the town of Genezzano near Rome, where a church was built in her honour, the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel.

The Sanctuary of Genezzano has been a pilgrimage site for Albanian Catholics since that time. Around the year 1700, the veneration of the Madonna of Genezzano also spread to the Arbëresh in Calabria, in particular to San Benedetto Ullano, with the help of the clergyman Stefano Rodotà. The present church in Genezzano was constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century and pilgrims visit it, walking barefoot, in particular on the feast day of Our Lady of Good Counsel, April 26.

The church of the Madonna in Shkodra was also the object of much veneration by northern Albanian Catholics. Even in April 1946, half a year after the communist takeover, over 2,000 people participated in a pilgrimage to it. Soon thereafter, however, the church was closed down and transformed into a dance hall, and in 1967, during the communist campaign against religion, it was razed to the ground.

Hardly less important than the Virgin Mary was **Saint Nicholas**, Albanian *Shën Koll*. He is the best known Orthodox saint and was by far the most venerated of all male saints, Orthodox or Catholic, in Albania. Saint Nicholas was a fourth-century bishop of Lycia in Asia Minor. In later times, beginning with the ninth century in the East and with the eleventh century in the West, he rose to become one of the most beloved saints of the church, in

¹ cf. N. Malcolm 1998, p. 130.

particular of the Orthodox church. In Greece, he took over the role of sea god Poseidon and, as such, a number of temples along the coast and on the Ionian islands were renamed after him. He is thus the patron saint of sailors and is associated with water. In 1087, the relics of Saint Nicholas were stolen by Italian merchants and enshrined in Bari, across the Strait of Otranto from Albania, which no doubt helped to strengthen his cult in the southwestern Balkans..

Saint Nicholas was one of the most popular Christian saints in Albania, venerated by Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims alike, and was the patron saint of many of the northern mountain tribes, among which the Shkreli.

The Albanian national hero Scanderbeg (1405-1468), Alb. *Skënderbeu*, was originally buried in a church devoted to Saint Nicholas in Lezha, dating from 1459. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano which are known to have existed in Albania in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, 40 (i.e. one in seven) were dedicated to Saint Nicholas, more than to any other saint except the Virgin Mary. Among the many historical Catholic churches dedicated to him were those in: Tugjemill and Zupci (Montenegro), Kastrati MM, Shkreli MM, Balëz MM recorded in 1363, Dajç SH, Gur i Zi SH, Shkodra SH with two churches, one in the fortress recorded in 1434 and one, *San Nicolo appresso la porta*, outside the gates recorded in 1416, Nënshat SH, Koman SH, Shala SH, Toplana SH, Shkjeza SH, Arst PU, Arrën KU, Janjeva (Kosova), Lezha LE, Kakarriq LE, Zejmen LE, Milot LA, Gjonëm LA, Orosh MR (*Lteri i Shën Kollit*), Macukull MT, Gur i Bardhë MT, Xibër-hane MT, Sina DI, Zabzun BZ, Okshtun BZ, Cudhini KR, Priska TR, Qafëmolla TR, Mushqeta TR, Fag TR, Persqop TR, Jatesh EL, Garunja EL, Gjonëm EL, Jagodina EL, Mollagjesh EL, Kutërman LB, Galush PE, Levanaj KJ and Zambishta KJ.

Of the many Orthodox churches and foundations dedicated to Saint Nicholas were those in: Vranina (Montenegro) with a monastery dating from 1232, a church at Lin PG on Lake Ohrid recorded in 1345, one in Voskopoja KO dating from 1721-1722, Boboshtica KO with two churches of which one with a monastery, Përmet PR, Lipa PR dating from the eighteen century, Kurjan FR dating from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, Vanaj FR dating from 1777, Krutja e Sipërme LU dating from 1811, Toshkës LU dating from 1811, Kavaja KJ dating from 1870, Valësh EL from the sixteenth century, Shelcan EL dating from the fourteenth century, Hormova TP, Perondia KV dating from the tenth century, Humelica GJ, Poliçan GJ, Topova GJ dating from 1788, Saraqinishta GJ from the early seventeenth century, Sopik, Dhrovjan DL from the sixteenth century, Dhivër SR dating from 1736, Nivicë-Bubar SR, Mesopotam DL dating from the late thirteenth century, and a monastery of Saint Nicholas on the Acroceraunian coastline.

The feast of Saint Nicholas on December 6, a pre-Christian feast observed in Albania by Christians and Muslims, celebrated the return of the souls of the dead and was commemorated by the slaughtering and roasting of a sheep on a spit, fërlik. For this feast, the animal was kept in the house for weeks in advance. In Hoti, Gruda and Kastrati, the feast of Saint Nicholas lasted a whole week. It was custom in the north to light a candle and to leave the door open on the eve of Saint Nicholas to let the saint and the spirits of the dead into the house so that they might take part in the feast. The owner of the house would raise his glass of raki and say, "May the Night of Saint Nicholas help us!" Alb. "Nata e Shënkollit na nihmoftë!" In some areas, three candles were also lit to the mythological juds so that they would not do any harm. The longer the candle burnt, the greater the prosperity would be for the house in question. One curse among the northern tribes was, "May the devil blow out your Saint Nicholas candle." The feuding Shkreli often concluded a besa, i.e. a cease-fire, to facilitate celebrations during the feast of their patron saint. It was also tradition among many tribes in the north for feuding families to meet on Saint Nicholas Day in order to reconcile and put an end to their feuds. In Upper Reka (Macedonia) bread was ritually blessed on this day with a cross and then given to all those present in the home to eat. In Kosova and

elsewhere, the feast of Saint Nicholas is known by non-Christians as *Kerstov* and, though not observed anymore, it is still remembered as a day of rest, i.e. a day on which one ought not to work.

Saint Nicholas was also commemorated on May 9, the anniversary of the transfer of his remains to Bari in 1087. The Shkreli and the Shala celebrated the May feast of Saint Nicholas when departing with their herds for summer pasture.

Saint Nicholas is the protagonist of a number of Albanian legends. According to one such legend, he arrived on his feast day at the house of a poor man and was received with hospitality but was given nothing to eat because the poor family had no food. Nicholas insisted that the poor man's only son be put in the oven and roasted for dinner. Since he had nothing else to offer his guest, the poor man acquiesced to the strange demand. But, lo and behold, a few hours later, when the oven door was opened, the fire was out and the boy was seen inside playing happily with a bag of coins, rewarded to him by Saint Nicholas.

The third saint to be mentioned in connection with the Albanians is rather special because, strictly speaking, she does not really exist. **Saint Veneranda**, Albanian *Shënepremte* or *Prende*, known in Geg dialect as *Prenne* or *Petka*, ~ Greek *Paraskevi*, Romanian *Sfânta Paraschiva*, was originally a pre-Christian deity and came to be identified by the Catholic Church with Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary. In Albania, she is known at any rate as Saint Veneranda.

In her Greek form, as the Christian martyr Saint Paraskevi, legend records that the Emperor Antonius threw boiling oil into her face, blinding her, but that her sight was restored to her through prayer. This saint, for whom there are no historical sources, was particularly popular in Albania and Greece, as elsewhere in the Balkans, and many villages and churches in Albania were named after her. Indeed, of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano which are known to have existed in Albania in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, 33, i.e. over one in eight, were dedicated to this obscure figure, more than to any other saint except the Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas. There were historical Catholic churches dedicated to Saint Veneranda in: Hoti MM, Shirq SH, Juban SH, Mavriq SH, Megulla SH, Palç BC, Kryezi PU, Arst PU, Arrën KU, Kthella MR, Rreja MR, Balldren LE, Kurbin LA with an abbey recorded in 1457, Gur i Bardhë MT, Budull KR, Bubg KR, Kus TR, Lalm TR, Cirma TR, Pajenga EL, Shëmill EL, Polis LB, Bërzesta LB, Stërbeg KJ, and Babunja LU. Among Orthodox churches devoted to her were those in: Çeta KJ, Lin PG, Valësh EL, Brajlat DL, Korça KO built before 1487, Lukova SR built in 1767, Nivicë-Bubar SR, Konispol SR, Përmet PR dating from 1776, Hllomo GJ from the nineteenth century, Vodhina GJ dating from the eighteenth century, and Suka Labova GJ.

Christians and Muslims used to make pilgrimages together to the church of Saint Veneranda in the Kurbin valley. There, the mentally ill were sheltered in the church for days and nights in hope of a cure for their illnesses.

Saint Veneranda has been identified with the cult of Venus, thus her Latin name Veneranda, Romanian *Sfânta Vineri*. Etymologically, Venus has given us the Romance term for Friday, ~ Lat. *dies veneris*, Ital. *venerdì*, French *vendredi*, which translates into Albanian as *e premte*, def. *e premtja*, thus the Albanian forms mentioned above. The Greek word for Friday, accordingly, is *Paraskevi*. That the Roman goddess of love and beauty is somehow involved in the cult of Saint Veneranda can be seen in other aspects, too. Lady Prende (Geg *Zoja Prenne*), also known as the Lady of Beauty (Geg *Zoja e bukuris*), was venerated in northern Albania in particular by women. On her feast day, July 26, also the feast of Saint Anne, the women would dress up in their finest clothes and put out a mortar and pestle, evident erotic symbolism. The rainbow, sacred to Veneranda, is known popularly as 'Lady Prende's belt,' i.e. Venus's girdle. According to legend, anyone who succeeded in jumping over the rainbow would change his sex.

It has been postulated that the cult of Saint Veneranda was encouraged by the church

in Albania as a strategy for stemming the spread of Islam. Her association with Friday meant that the faithful would be busy attending Friday mass in her honour instead of participating in Friday prayers in a mosque.

The fourth and last great object of Albanian veneration was **Saint George**, Albanian *Shëngjergj*. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano, 19 were dedicated to Saint George, more than to any other saint except the Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas and the rather obscure Saint Veneranda. Among these were churches in: Bar (now Montenegro), Shën Gjergj (Sveti Djordj), i.e. Saint George on the Buna River, Sapa SH, Drisht SH, Kukël SH, Nënshat SH, Toplana SH, Tërbun PU, Cakala LA, Ndërfana MR recorded in 1457, Macukull MT, Reç DI, Muhur DI, Bërzhita TR, Shëngjergj TR, Tujan TR, Todorenj TR, Vidhas EL, Murras EL, Shëmill EL, Bena EL and Polis LB. There were Orthodox churches devoted to Saint George in: Berat dating from the fourteenth century, Rreth-Libofsha FR dating from 1776, Strum FR dating from 1801, Korça, Vithkuq KO from the eighteenth century, Shipska KO from the eighteenth century, Boboshtica KO, Nikova GJ, Terihat GJ, Vllaho-Goranxi GJ, Vanishta GJ from the eighteenth century, Voloteri between Nivicë-Bubar and Saranda SR dating from the eighteenth century. There is also presently an Orthodox Church of Saint George in Durrës.

The feast day of Saint George, April 23, marks the beginning of summer in Albania, indeed in old times it marked the beginning of the new year, and is associated with numerous popular customs, most of which are designed to ensure growth in children, farm animals and crops. It is the high point of the Christian calendar among the Albanians, at least with relation to popular customs. In Kosova and Macedonia, Saint George's Day, celebrated on May 6 according to the eastern calendar, is associated with the eating of a flija (a pizza-shaped dish of pasta and yoghurt which is baked for hours over a hot coal fire). In Podujeva (Podujevo), nettles are picked from the garden, dipped in water and used to sprinkle the children with in order to give them strength. In Presheva (Preševo) children were indeed bathed in nettles. In Tetova (Tetovo), villagers at the foot of the Sharr mountains bathed their children in water from the Vardar river, which they fetched the night before and mixed with various ingredients (red flowers, red-coloured eggshells, blossoms etc.). The bath water was then thrown back into the river and all potential harm to the child with it. The tradition of bathing children in spring flowers and blossoms is still known throughout Kosova and Western Macedonia. Flowers are also put under children's pillows at bedtime. In Shala, shepherds gathered flowers and herbs on Saint George's Day and fed them to the farm animals, which were adorned with ivy leaves and 'smoked' with incense. It was believed in the northern mountains that herbs and plants had a particularly strong healing effect if picked between the two Saint George's days. In Shkodra, children would decorate doorways with branches and flowers picked before dawn. In Mirdita it was believed that, should there be thunder storms between the two Saint George's days, there would be no snakes that summer. Saint George's Day is also known as the feast of the gypsies and is identified in the Muslim tradition with Rûz-i hazir, or chidr. The Orthodox of Kiçnica in Upper Reka (Macedonia) also celebrate Saint George of the Winter (Shën Gjergj i Dimrit) on December 9.

Near Besh at the foot of the Dajti mountain range northeast of Tirana there is a cave which is named after Saint George. The inhabitants of these mountains considered the cave holy and used to go on pilgrimages to it, in particular on Saint George's Day. There, they would slaughter animals, roast them on a spit, and eat and drink in the cave. Candles were lit and coins were left behind to implore the saint to assist the sick and weary. People too ill to make the journey would send their clothes to be laid out in the cave for twenty-four hours. It was hoped that wearing the clothes infused with the spirit of sanctity from the cave and drinking water brought from it would speed up their recovery.

In Albanian legends, Saint George appears as a hero out hunting in the mountains. In

one folk tale, he kills the dragon-like *kulshedra* and saves the king's daughter from certain death. The Muslims attribute his heroic deeds to the legendary Bektashi holy man, Sari Salltëk.

Mention may also be made of a number of other saints who have played a secondary role in religious life in Albania.

Saint Athanasius (ca. 296-373), Alb. Shën Thanas, also Tanush, was Bishop of Alexandria and one of the four great Greek doctors of the church. He presided over the see of his native Alexandria for forty-six years, including diverse periods of exile, and is remembered as an opponent of the Arian heresy. His feast day is May 2 or January 18. The Orthodox of Upper Reka (Macedonia), in particular those of the village of Nicpur, celebrate Saint Athanasius on January 31 according to the eastern or Julian calendar. In some areas of the southern Balkans, Athanasius took over the functions of the ancient Dionysos, who was originally a Thracian fertility god. In Albania, there was a mountain named after him on the Acroceraunian peninsula, as well as many churches, usually built on hill and mountains like those of Saint Elias. Among these were Orthodox monasteries in Poliçan GJ dating from 1601 and Kardhig GJ, and Orthodox churches in Labova e Sipërme GJ, Bularat GJ, Lekël TP, Leshnica e Poshtme SR dating from 1797, Peca SR dating from 1525, Dhrovjan DL, Finiq DL, Muzina DL dating from the eighteenth century, Voskopoja KO dating from 1724, Lin PG, Rrëmenj PG, Miraka LB, Bizhuta EL, Shushica EL, Gërmenj KJ, Luz KJ, and Karavasta LU dating from 1778. In the north of the country there was also a church of Saint Athanasius across the Drin from Pult.

Saint Anthony (1195-1231), Albanian Shën Ndou, Shën Nou, or Shnou, was a Franciscan missionary born in Lisbon. He was a great preacher and influential teacher, and is thus counted among the doctors of the church. His shrine in Padua is venerated by pilgrims from many countries. The cult of Saint Anthony was late to spread to Albania. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano which are known to have existed in Albania in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, not a single one was dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua, although there was a church in Boks SH devoted to an Anthony, Bishop of Ohrid (r. 449-458), and the ruins of a church of Saint Anthony on Cape Rodoni. It was no doubt under the influence of nineteenth-century Franciscan missionaries from Italy and subsequently of the ubiquitous statues of him in Catholic churches that Anthony of Padua first became widely known in northern Albania. His cult grew rapidly in the nineteenth century and Saint Anthony soon became the patron saint of many of the Catholic mountain tribes of the north. During the first half of the twentieth century, many Albanian Catholics made the long pilgrimage by boat and carriage to Padua to visit the shrine of Saint Anthony there. He is also revered by the Catholics of Mirdita at the sanctuary of Saint Anthony near Lac. Even under communist rule when religion had been officially abolished, people continued to flock in droves to the church of Saint Anthony on the mountain above the town. Indeed their numbers were so embarrassingly high that the communist authorities often blocked the road leading to the sanctuary and hassled the pilgrims to drive them away. During the final years of the dictatorship, the government was finally obliged to report on such pilgrimages in the press, doing so with bitter lament. Pilgrims, including a good number of Muslims, climb the mountain at Laç and usually remain at the site for three days. Saint Anthony is invoked by the Mirditans in the exclamatory expression, "O zoti Shnanou!" His feast day is June 13, though he is also commemorated in some regions (Plan SH for instance) on January 16, and by the Orthodox on January 17.

Saint Blaise, Alb. *Shën Vlash*, *Shën Vllas*, known in Latin as Blasius and in Italian as Biagie or Biagio, was bishop of Sebastea in Armenia, now Sivas in eastern Turkey, and has become the patron saint of merchants. He was martyred under the Emperor Licinius (r. 311-324) after being tortured with a big brass comb, which became his symbol. The cult of Saint Blaise spread to Europe in the eighth century and he is often invoked by believers to

cure afflictions of the throat, the Blessing of Saint Blaise. In Albania, there was a monastery to Saint Blaise built on the north slope of Mount Tomor and referred to in 1343 as Hibernum S. Blasii. Another monastery at Shënavlash, also known as Vrrin, near Durrës, was once visited by pilgrims who hoped to be cured of their illnesses. It was rebuilt in 1996. Another monastery was built on the north slope of Mount Tomor, referred to in 1343 as *Hibernum S*. Blasii. There were also churches dedicated to Saint Blaise in Shkodra extra Scutari ad S. Blasium, dating from the fourteenth century, Kthella MR, Skuraj MT, Gjonëm LA, Mazha KR, Mëner TR, Bishqem PE, Gjuricaj DR, on Cape Rodoni, in Vlora (Shën Vllasi), and a nineteenth century Orthodox church in Dhuvjan GJ. On a wooded hill near the former settlement of Sebasta near Lac there once stood a monastery, which was destroyed in 1853 by an earthquake. Right below the church, built in 1557, was a grotto in which Saint Blaise is said to have lived. According to the Croatian Franciscan Lovro Mihačević, the local people insisted he was Albanian and not Armenian. It is evident therefore that there were two saints named Blasius: the above-mentioned Armenian saint and an Albanian or Balkan figure. This latter Blasius is said to have been tortured in Durrës and is the patron saint of Dubrovnik, where he is buried. He is regarded there as a continuation of the pre-Christian deity Veles who guarded the flocks of the early Slavs. In Bulgaria, it was custom not to yoke the oxen on his feast day. The women would go out and place a loaf of bread on the animals' horns, offering the bread to passers-by and then to the animals themselves. His feast day is February 3 in the western calendar and February 11 in the eastern calendar.

The Greek Orthodox Saint Cosmas Aitolos was born in Epirus in 1714 and came to be a respected figure of eighteenth-century Greek culture. He travelled widely, preached and strove to defend Greek civilization and Orthodoxy in an age of mass conversion to Islam. Towards the end of his life he returned to Epirus and, during the rule of Kurd Ahmed Pasha, travelled and preached throughout southern Albania. Journeying from Himara and Vlora to Berat, Myzege, Durrës (1777), Kruja and as far as Pogradec and Voskopoja, he did his best to keep up the spirit of Greek Orthodoxy until his death on August 24, 1779. He was revered in Berat in particular and is still remembered in Epirus in general. In Himara there once stood a little building called the Hut of Father Cosmas, where the saint is said to have taken his rest and preached to the masses. Saint Cosmas was buried at the small church, built in 1813, which bears his name in Kolkondas FR near the mouth of the Seman river. The site is presently being restored. The remains of Cosmas Aitolos were transferred from there to the archaeological museum of Fier in 1984, and, rumour has it, were recently being sold by the custodian to the highest bidder. Other relics of Saint Cosmas are kept in a special shrine at the main Metropolitan Cathedral in Athens, where some Northern Epirotes come to pray for the annexation of southern Albania by Greece. Though a purveyor of Hellenic culture, Cosmas Aitolos is still highly regarded among Orthodox Albanians in Albania and in the United States for the profound spiritual message and encouragement he gave.

Saint Demetrius, Albanian *Shën Dhimitër* or *Shmitër*, was a Balkan saint martyred in Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia) for having preached Christianity at the time of Emperor Maximian (r. 285-305 A.D.). His cult was centred in Thessalonika where he relics are preserved in a basilica bearing his name. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano, nine were dedicated to Saint Demetrius. There were early Catholic churches to him in: Krytha SH, Dajç SH, Markaj BC, Gryka LE, Spas KU, Lalëz DR, Çidhna DI and Garunja EL. There were also Orthodox churches in the Fier region, in Berat dating from 1607, Dhrovjan DL, Qeparo VL built in 1760, Nivicë-Bubar SR, Poliçan GJ dating from 1526, Konispol SR, Boboshtica KO dating from the seventeenth century, Lin PG, and Prizren mentioned as early as 1276. There was also an Orthodox monastery devoted to Saint Demetrius in Ballsh (Glavinitza) mentioned in 1219. Saint Demetrius is often represented as a warrior saint like Saint George, and is referred to in the Orthodox liturgy. His feast day, October 8 in the western calendar and around October 24-26 in the eastern calendar, is at the

opposite time of the year to the popular springtime feast of Saint George. It thus marked the beginning of winter and was the day for bringing the farm animals back down into the valley after they had spent the summer grazing in the high alpine pastures. In Struga, trees and roses were also planted on Saint Demetrius Day and a special cabbage-roll dish was made for family gatherings. Elsewhere in Western Macedonia, flatbread and grain were sent to church to be blessed by a priest, and sweets were eaten in the evening. Demetrius is the patron saint of the villages of Vallkavia (Volkovija) and Nistrova (Nistrovo) there. In the Muslim tradition, this feast day is identified with *Qâsim*, i.e. October 26.

Saint Elias, Albanian Shëndelli, Shën Ilija, or Shën Li, ~ Romanian Sântilie, Aromunian Sândâliya, Şindiliya, Serbocr. Ilija, originally the Old Testament prophet Elijah, rides through the heavens on a white horse or in a chariot of fire, and hurls thunderbolts at kulshedras. Because of this, he is identified in some regions with the mythological dragua. At any rate, not only a Christian saint, Elias is also a weather god and provides protection against storms and fires. In the Serbian tradition, when there is thunder and lightening, it is said that Saint Ilija is driving off storm fiends. Saint Elias took the place of the ancient Greek sun god Helios, no doubt due to the similarity between the two words in Greek: elias, gen. eliou 'Elias', and (h)êlios, gen. (h)êliou 'sun'. He is sometimes considered to be a reflection of the early sun cult of Mithras. Albania had many hilltop churches and sanctuaries dedicated to Saint Elias. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano, nine were dedicated to him. Among these historical churches devoted to him were those in: Bërdica SH, Shkodra SH with a Dominican monastery recorded in 1444, Prelnikaj MM, Pista KU, Bruzja KR, Fravesh TR, Kusha TR and Bizhuta EL. There were also Orthodox churches to Saint Elias in Boboshtica KO, Voskopoja KO, Korça, Mborja KO, Bugëz PG on Lake Ohrid, in Buhal PR dating from 1814, Jorgucat GJ dating from 1586, Stegopull GJ dating from 1624, and Butrint SR. A good number of mountain peaks are also named after him, including the mountain range of Shëndellia east of Memaliai and Tepelena. Elias is recognized as a prophet in Islam, too. Indeed, Mohammed's ascension to heaven is thought to have been inspired by that of Elias. Christians used to venerate Saint Elias at the Bektashi tekke of Sersem Ali in Tetovo, and in central Albania the saint has been identified with Abbas Ali, since the latter Muslim holy man lies buried high on Mount Tomor. This is also no doubt due to lexical interference between the words Ali and Li. Saint Elias' feast day is July 20 when, in Albanian popular tradition, animals were sacrified. The village of Zavalina near Elbasan, for instance, used to sacrifice an ox on this day.

Saint Euphemia, Alb. Shën Mi, was martyred in Chalcedon near Constantinople on September 16, 303 (or 307) after various tortures. Her cult spread rapidly and by the end of the fourth century a basilica had been built over her grave. In the early seventh century, her body was transferred to Constantinople itself. Her feast day is September 16, although the Greeks celebrate it on July 11 in commemoration of the miracle witnessed by the bishops at the Council of Chalcedon. Euphemia is one of the most honoured virgin-martyrs of the Orthodox church. In Albania there was a church devoted to her in Prell MT in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, there were churches to her in Qafa e Malit MR, known as Zoja Shën Mi, and in Kallmet LE. Behind the little church of Saint Euphemia in Kallmet, it is remembered that there was a spring of holy water flowing out of the rocks, which believers would visit after mass to drink from. Indeed such were the throngs of people in the mid-nineteenth century trying to get at the water that fights often broke out, which led occasionally to deaths. In 1853, the Bishop of Kallmet was thus obliged to build a wall around the spring. After that, only two men were allowed into the spring of Saint Euphemia at a time. They handed the holy water out to the waiting masses, and thus brought peace and order to the diocese.

According to legend, the obscure **Saint Marina**, Albanian *Shën Marena*, ~ Romanian *Mărina*, was taken by her father, Eugenius of Bithynia in Asia Minor, to live as a monk in a

monastery. She died a virgin and only after her death was it discovered she was a woman. One of her hands is said to be preserved as a relic at the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. Marina was much revered in the Archdiocese of Achrida (Ohrid) in the eighteenth century, as well as in Greece and Serbia. The fourteenth-century monastery of Llënga in the Mokra region, not far from Pogradec, was devoted to her, as were churches in Seria EL, Nuaja KR, and in Dardha in the north. Her feast day on July 17 was the day of the year on which all fires were to be put out. In popular tradition, Saint Marina was worshipped by the Albanians and Vlachs of southeastern Albania for good health. She appeared to them during the full moon, her fair image and long flowing hair radiating in the moonlight. Marina's holy spring had the power to cure the sick. In Bulgaria, where she has been associated with the ancient Thracian goddess Artemis Bendis, Saint Marina was also known as the mistress of snakes. She was said to set snakes free and take care of them, and also to cure people suffering from snake bites.

Saint Martin of Tours (315-397), Alb. *Shën Martin*, was born in Hungary and raised in Italy. He is noted, while a young officer in Amiens, for having given his cloak to a naked beggar, an act which accompanied his conversion to Christianity. He later lived for a time in Dalmatia. Of the some 275 Catholic churches recorded by Cordignano, seven were dedicated to Saint Martin. Among these were churches in: Gruda MM, Truen PU, Zgërdhesh KR, Bizhuta EL, and Bena EL. Saint Martin serves in Albanian belief as the patron saint of shepherds and their herds, which he protects against wolves. His feast day, November 11, was celebrated in particular in Pashtresh, in the Shpat region of central Albania. It was believed that it was not propitious for farmers or shepherds to shear their sheep or goats on this day. If the shears were used, the animals would not thrive. In the mountains around Shkodra, Saint Martin's Day, like Saint Demetrius elsewhere, marked the beginning of winter.

The Archangel Saint Michael, Alb. Shën Mëhill, Shënmhill, Shmill, known in the Bible as the 'captain of the heavenly host,' is regarded as the protector of Christians, and of soldiers in particular. Churches and chapels to Saint Michael, like those of Saint Elias, tended to be built on hills and mountain tops. In the early seventeenth century there were at least seven Catholic churches dedicated to Saint Michael, among which on Mount Sapa SH, on the Krraba Pass TR, in Jatesh EL, Mëner TR, Shullaz LA and Kashnjet LE. There was also a church near Ulcinj recorded in 1426 and an abbey in Kir SH. Among the Orthodox churches and foundations devoted to him were those in: Prizren with a monastery dating from 1348, and churches in Berat (Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel dating from ca. 1300), Bubullima LU, Vuno GJ dating from the year 1783, Nikova GJ, Gjirokastra dating from the year 1776, Mingul GJ from the eighteenth century, Voskopoja KO dating from 1722, Vithkug KO dating from 1682, and Shalës ER from the seventeenth century. His feast day, September 29 in the western calendar and October 27 in the eastern calendar, was commemorated in Shala territory in the Catholic villages of Pog and Kir and in the village of Boga MM. It was observed by the tribes of the northern mountains, Christians and Muslims alike, and by the Shala in particular, by the slaughtering and roasting of a sheep. Before dinner on the eve of Michaelmas, a candle would be lit and, after prayers, a meal would be eaten in honour of the saint. Someone in the family would hold vigil all night and all the next day to ensure that the candle did not go out. If it did happen to go out, it brought shame and bad luck upon the family in question. Michael is the patron saint of the village of Krokornica in Western Macedonia.

Saint Naum or Nahum, Alb. *Shën Naum*, Slav. *Sveti Naum*, was a popular saint in the Orthodox church, to whom many miracles are attributed. He founded the famed monastery which bears his name and is now situated on the Albanian-Macedonian border on the southern bank of Lake Ohrid. The cult of Saint Naum spread in the first half of the eighteenth century with the flourishing of Voskopoja KO as a centre of Orthodox culture and with the

rise of the Archdiocese of Achrida (Ohrid). His fame extended from here southwards to Mount Athos and northwards up to Vienna. His image is to be seen in the frescoes of the churches of Voskopoja, Shipska KO and Vithkuq KO. The Bektashi also went on pilgrimage to the monastery of Saint Naum, believing their holy man Sari Salltëk to be buried there. Saint Naum's original feast day was December 23, but in 1727 on the authority of the Archbishop of Achrida, it was changed to June 20 to make pilgrimages less strenuous in the continental climate of the interior of the Balkans.

Saint Stephen (d. ca. 35 A.D.), Alb. *Shën Shtjefën*, is known by the church as the first martyr for Christ. He was a zealous preacher. In Albania, Saint Stephen was the original patron saint of Shkodra. The church bearing his name in the fortress of Shkodra was referred to in 1319 as being the cathedral of the city, and his image appeared on coins issued there. In the Middle Ages there was also a diocese of Stephanensis in Albania with its centre at Stephaniaca, a now abandoned settlement near the mouth of the Ishëm river, possibly near Shëllinza LA. In the early seventeenth century we know of at least seven Catholic churches dedicated to Saint Stephen, among which in: Barbullush SH, Blinisht LE dating from the Middle Ages, Spas KU, Kllojka TR and Okshtun KJ, as well as an Orthodox church in Dhërmi VL. His feast day is December 26.

Although outside the framework of this paper, reference must be made, in passing at least, to the good number of Muslim saints venerated in Albania. There are numerous cult centres throughout the country in particular with mausoleums, Albanian *tyrbe*, in which the holy figures of Islam, including many Bektashi, lie buried and are, or at least were venerated. Among the main Muslim saints of Albania are: **Abbas Ali**, to whose mausoleum on the top of Mount Tomor the faithful go on pilgrimage every August; **Abdullah Baba** from the southern Albanian village of Alipostivan; the now forgotten **Ali Dost Dede** of Gjirokastra; **Asim Baba** also of Gjirokastra who is said to have played a major role in the spread of Bektashism in Albania; **Demir Han** buried in Tepelena; **Hasan Dede** of Përmet; the benevolent early nineteenth-century female **Dervish Hatixhe** of Tirana, whose grave is still visited by the inhabitants of the Albanian capital; **Haxhi Baba** of Përmet; **Kusum Baba**, also known simply as Kus Baba, whose mausoleum in Vlora was reopened in April 1998; **Mehmet Efendi** of Shkodra; **Qazim Baba** from the northern Greek town of Kastoria, who lies buried in Bilisht DV; Bektashi holy man and legendary figure **Sari Salltëk** of Kruja; and the great **Shemimi Baba**, also of Kruja, who was murdered in 1803.

Though Albania has often been described as a land of tenacious pagans who can only be superficially converted, and though many a missionary and preacher has been driven to despair over the centuries and especially over the last few years, Christianity has deep roots in Albania, as does Islam. Alas, much of this rich cultural heritage has disappeared. It was rooted out actively during the long years of the communist dictatorship when all Albanians were supposed to think alike and believe, or rather not believe, alike. Churches, mosques, Bektashi *tekkes* and other pilgrimage sites of all faiths were closed down and many of them were demolished by the Albanian authorities. Old customs and beliefs were radically erased from the minds of the Albanians and, as such, comparatively little remains of this identity. Only in the coming years, when the Albanians have regained their place on planet earth after a long absence under communist dictator Enver Hoxha, will we see what elements of their traditional identity have survived.

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