Contesting the Ottoman conquest

The Ottoman conquest of the Balkans was a prolonged process characterized by considerable regional variation. There was stiff resistance over decades and ensuing demographic disruption in some regions, and a relatively less contested establishment of Ottoman rule where warfare had been more limited in space and time in other regions. Ottoman conquest in Albania started in ca. 1385 and ended in 1479 when Venice had to cede its territory, after a protracted war (1463–79), around the fortress of Shkodra in northern Albania. The Republic of St Mark lost its last outposts in present-day Montenegro (Dulcigno/Ulcinj, Antivari/Bar) in 1570. Bulgaria (1393), Kosovo (1455), and Serbia (1459) had already been taken. With the Ottoman capture of Belgrade from the Hungarians in 1521, the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans was complete.

Like in other regions occupied by the Ottomans, also in the Albanian context it would be misleading to describe the Ottomans as Muslim Turks from Asia Minor who invaded foreign territory. Some Ottoman military leaders and many of their troops belonged to the regional society which was split, as in other parts of the Balkans, in a pro-Ottoman and an anti-Ottoman camp. This cleavage ran through important Albanian noble families (Zenebish, Muzaki, Balsha, Dukagjin, Kastriota). Islamisation in the first phase of conquest and Ottoman domination (until the first half of the sixteenth century) was not a necessary condition for joining the Ottoman imperial system. Nevertheless, an Islamized local elite emerged, mainly in return for rights to occupy holdings in the conquered land under the timar system. Beside Islamized sipahi (cavalry), Ottoman regional troops consisted also of Orthodox auxiliary units. The bitterness of regional warfare can also be explained by old feuds that were carried out under the umbrella of Ottoman conquest.

Warfare was centered in central and northern Albania. The Ottomans eventually oppressed regional resistance by adopting drastic measures that led in central Albania to the disappearance of over two thirds of the population after two major campaigns led by Sultan Mehmed II in person (1464/67). Enslavement, mass flight, and massacres changed the social structure in central (Mati, Dibra) and northern Albania.
The Catholic culture which had been dominant in northern Albania and its emerging humanist culture closely related to Adriatic models was almost destroyed. Catholic Albanian refugees settled in Venice where Albanian scholars such as Marinus Barletius published widely read historiographical works in Latin, while Orthodox Albanians from central Albania and from the Peloponnesus – where they had immigrated at the beginning of the fifteenth century – moved to Southern Italy (Kingdom of Naples). There, they formed a distinct community (Arbëresh) which exists until the present day.

Southern Albania was less affected by Ottoman attacks, guerrilla warfare, and Ottoman counterattacks than other parts of the Southwestern Balkans. Ottoman conquest came to a preliminary end in 1417 when the coastal town of Vlora fell, and its results were stabilized in the mid-1430s after a failed uprising of local Orthodox Albanian noblemen in southern and central Albania. Although the Ottoman advance destroyed parts of the regional demographic network, the area up to the river Shkumbin was soon organized as an Ottoman province (Sancak-i Arvanid). One of the oldest Ottoman tax registers covers this area. Southern Albania did not join the resistance in central and northern Albania led by George Kastriota Scanderbeg (1405–68).

Macedonia served since the conquest of Skopje (1392) as a base of Ottoman marcher lords who pushed conquest northwards and westwards. Kosovo was eventually integrated into the Ottoman provincial system only in 1455 when Novo Brdo, the most important silver mine of the Balkans, was conquered. The short-lived Serbian Empire of Stefan Dušan (tsar from 1346 to 1355) which comprised also Macedonia, northern and central Greece, did not survive the Ottoman onslaught. A coalition of his successors had survived the indecisive but legendary battle of Kosovo Polje against Ottoman forces in 1389 but kept reduced territory and authority mainly in present-day central Serbia with residences in Belgrade and Smederevo on the Danube until 1459.

Sporadic local and regional resistance accompanied Ottoman rule until it ended in 1912. The motivation of Albanian rebels did not change considerably over time. They refused to pay taxes, they declined to accept imperial law instead of regional oral traditions (different regional versions of kanun), they demanded home rule, and they wished to keep out imperial representatives especially if they were foreigners. Christian and Muslim Albanians did not differ substantially in their refusal to accept centralized imperial rule. However, until the end of the eighteenth century, only Christian Albanians in mountainous coastal areas followed Scanderbeg’s example and sought wider support for armed opposition. Especially in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, they pursued ties with the Catholic powers, Habsburg Spain with its dependencies in Southern Italy, and Venice. Traditional historiography of the Balkan national states cultivated the idea of permanent national uprisings against Ottoman rule as a decisive proof for a proto-national identity. New approaches to Ottoman studies downplaying resistance that contested the legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire have led some research to the other extreme. Recent interpretations avoid projecting back national interpretations but acknowledge resistance for a complex of local motives.

The most important resistance was framed by the two Ottoman campaigns against the Habsburg monarchy and its allies in the Holy Roman Empire. Both had reached the gates of Vienna. After they were repulsed in 1529, the Ottomans still held most of Hungary and Croatia. Failing in their second advance on Vienna in 1683, they were then forced out of Hungary and Croatia in the Habsburg counteroffensive. In the long intervening years, uprisings against the Ottomans had been confined to remote and isolated mountain areas not close to the Adriatic Sea (Himara in southern Albania, parts of Epirus, Montenegro, Catholic tribes in northern Albania). Both in Orthodox and Catholic areas, local clergymen played an important
role in maintaining communication channels with Southern Italy and Venice. In times of war, mainly around 1600, Balkan Christian adventurers and pretenders were roaming European courts advertising projects for bringing down Ottoman rule in the Balkans. Uprisings at the Adriatic periphery were never a serious threat to Ottoman rule since they remained confined to small areas.

When however Habsburg troops conquered Belgrade in 1688, the key Ottoman fortress protecting access to the south, they quickly penetrated into the core of the Ottoman Balkans (present-day Serbia and Kosovo). They burned Skopje in 1689. For the first time since 1448, Christian troops advanced into the central Balkans. This triggered extended uprisings of the Christian population, both Orthodox and Catholic, in an area from northern Bulgaria to Kosovo. Since Habsburg troops had overstretched their supply lines, the Ottomans could suppress the rebellions, and many rebels followed the retreating Habsburg troops. The Balkan Christians, mainly Orthodox Serb refugees but also Catholics, numbering some 40,000, were settled in the recently reconquered territory of the present-day Vojvodina in northern Serbia. Remembered in Serbia as the Great Migration, a far larger number came from an initial account, since discounted, of 40,000 households. The exodus still left a substantial number of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, in subsequently disputed proportions, but weakened the Christian capacity for further resistance.

Ottoman rule in the Balkan southwest was challenged more in the eighteenth century by regional Muslim warlords than by Orthodox insurgents. A renewed Ottoman offensive reclaimed northern Serbia in 1739. But the last two decades of the eighteenth century were a period of general weakness for the Ottoman Empire. Muslim regional warlords emerged in southern Albania/Epirus (Ali Pasha, died 1822, with his center in Ioannina), northern Albania (the Bushatliu family, around Shkodra), and Kosovo (Begolli, Rrotullaj). Ali Pasha who had acquired his wealth by extorting merchants and pastoralists, was appointed by the Sultan governor of Thessaly in 1785 and occupied Ioannina in 1788. His power was based on a private army and an extended network of trading towns. Like other warlords he benefited from the tax farming to which the Ottoman regime had been forced to resort. Around 1800, Ali was probably the richest political leader in the Balkans owning some 900 estates and over 1 million cattle. Between 1820 and the early 1830s, the Ottoman Empire successfully suppressed these regional power centers and re-established the authority of its imperial center, which however remained challenged by regional forces. In this respect, the Balkan southwest was not an exception. From Bosnia and the Danube provinces to the Arab parts of the Empire, regional warlords were challenging the authority of the Sultan at the turn of the century.

The formal and informal power structure

The southwestern Balkans served several geostrategic functions in the Ottoman Empire. The area was a springboard to attack Southern Italy (in 1480–1 an Ottoman expeditionary force conquered Otranto in Apulia); its ports (mainly Avlonya/Vlora) controlled the entrance into the Adriatic Sea and threatened Catholic (Venetian, Spanish) seaways in this sensitive area; mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Muslim corsairs from the entire Mediterranean used the port of Ulcinj as base against Christian sea trade. On the other hand, the area protected the western periphery of the Empire against the Catholic powers in the Mediterranean. The major transport route linking the port of Durrės to Salonica and Constantinople, the Via Egnatia, remained under imperial control until 1912. The importance of the Balkan southwest is reflected in the early establishment of direct Ottoman rule. The provincial system of southern and central Albania was organized as Sancak Arvanid (1415/17); in 1455 the Ottomans installed the Sancak of
Ottoman Albania and Kosovo

Vushtrri/Vučitrn (or Prishtina/Priština) in central Kosovo, and in the same year the Sancak Prizren in western Kosovo. Northern Albania and parts of Kosovo were organized as Sancak Shkodra. As in other parts of the Empire, imperial rule was centered in the plains and in urban centers, while mountainous rural areas enjoyed a certain degree of self-government. The mountainous part of present-day Montenegro traditionally boasted of continuous home rule. Recent scholarship has however found evidence that around 1500 the Ottoman Empire penetrated even remote mountain areas in northern Albania and Montenegro and enforced, at least temporarily, direct imperial rule. However, costs of direct rule stood in no relation to potential benefits. This explains why, in the long run, the Ottomans preferred, as other Empires before them, indirect rule in such areas. Regional and tribal leaders (bayraktars) promised loyalty and provided troops or auxiliary warriors, and in exchange the Empire did not interfere in the internal affairs of mountain areas at the local and micro-regional level. This limited self-government was confined to less accessible areas and did not affect imperial rule in the strategically and economically more important plains.

Legal plurality

The Balkan southwest had lived since the Middle Ages in a system of coexisting legal traditions. In the Serbian kingdom/empire/despotate which had controlled the area between the late thirteenth and the fifteenth century, royal/imperial law was codified in Stefan Dušan’s Zakonik. It co-existed with urban statutes of Adriatic city communities, oral customary law in the mountains, and special privileges for foreign miners and merchants in mining towns. Ottoman rule did not radically alter this system of legal plurality. However, there were changes within this system. Urban autonomy in the Adriatic towns disappeared, and the northern Albanian coastal towns were disconnected from the Adriatic legal space with its codified law and city councils. The Ottomans introduced Islamic law (şeriat) and imperial law (kanun) and tolerated the legal self-administration for the Orthodox communities according to ecclesiastical law. Oral customary law (örf) prevailed in remote mountain areas.

Indeed, this customary regime was boosted by Ottoman conquest and the retreat of many lowlanders to the mountains of central and northern Albanian. The roots of the different regional oral legal traditions (kanun, not to be confused with the imperial law) are hard to ascertain, but they already existed by the initial period of Ottoman conquest. The best known, the kanun of Leka Dukagjin (ascribed to the head of a kin group in central Albania, d. 1481) prevailed in northern Albania, while the kanun of Skanderbeg and the kanun of Labëria (a south Albanian microregion) were applied in central and southern Albania respectively – all these traditions were codified only in the twentieth century. The oral legal tradition spread into the lowlands with the continuous migration from the mountains to the plains. Its application depended on the strength of imperial authorities which differed over times. Customary law was perceived by many Albanians as a pillar of their political identity. Until 1912 the Ottoman Empire failed to establish an all-encompassing imperial legal system.

Migrations

Migrations during and after the Ottoman conquest are until the present day the object of political controversies. This is particularly true for Kosovo, whose demographic history is hotly contested by Serbian and Albanian historians. The entire area of the Balkan southwest experienced migrations which typically cannot be quantified. Serbian migration to southern Hungary started in the fourteenth century because of the Ottoman advance. Serbian noblemen,
including the despot (prince), received feudal rights from the Hungarian crown. Orthodox Vlachs were pushed into the northwest of the Balkans (Herzegovina and Bosnia), Catholic and Orthodox Albanians fled, as we have seen, across the Adriatic to Italy.

Peasants from lowland northern Albania retreated to the mountains and formed tribal societies. Tribes referred to a common mythical ancestor and possessed their own territories. This system was a reaction to destructive Ottoman warfare that has disrupted traditional agriculture in the plains. In the densely populated highlands, only tightly knit groups of pastoral-warriors could survive in the competition for scarce pasture-land and water. The tribal system encompassed the area stretching from central Albania (Mirëta) to the Great Highlands (Malësia e madhe) and Montenegro. Confessional (Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox) and linguistic (Albanian, South Slavic) differentiation marked the highlands. However, their inhabitants shared a common way of life (pastoral economy) and of values (warrior ideals), and even clashes between Muslim Albanian and Orthodox Montenegrin tribes were glorified in a similar way with epic songs. Unlike the Balkan southeast (Thrace, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Thessaly), there were no major Muslim Turkish settlements in the southwest. Muslim communities emerged mainly as a result of conversions among the local population. The Ottoman central authority intervened only in sensitive border areas. There it built new fortresses (Elbasan in 1466) or replaced the population by Muslims (Shkodra in 1479).

A major influx of new settlers did not come from Anatolia, but from Spain and Portugal. At the end of the fifteenth century, Sephardi Jews immigrated mainly to the major port of Vlora, where they had their own quarters by the early sixteenth century. Most of them moved on to Salonica, making it the major center for Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the Balkans. One of the most neglected population movements with consequences for the entire peninsula affected central Serbia in the mid-sixteenth century. Some regions lost over half of their inhabitants. These mainly Orthodox Serbs had been attracted by the Ottoman settlement strategy in the fertile plains of central Hungary, turned into a province after 1541. To secure this border area, the Empire invited its Muslim and Orthodox subjects to take over former Hungarian property and offered tax exemptions and other privileges. A major exodus from central Serbia also encouraged migration from the upland, less fertile areas of the southwest, and from Macedonia and even from parts of Bulgaria.

While these major population movements can be traced in recorded sources, the much more common internal migrations of smaller groups (extended families) were barely noted in Ottoman sources. They are attested in reports of local Catholic clergymen to the Congregatio de propaganda fide (established in Rome in 1622), especially when people were moving towards the Adriatic coast where the Catholic Church had preserved parts of its organizational network. One has to distinguish between seasonal migration of herdsmen between summer and winter pastures, and permanent emigration. The latter was prompted by economic pressure (bad harvests) and often by blood feuds, which forced people to leave because they felt threatened by acts of revenge. Most of these minor movements originated in the mountains of central and northern Albania and were directed both to the West (Adriatic coast) and the east (Kosovo, western Macedonia). The multi-layered Albanian dialects in western Macedonia demonstrate that Albanians had immigrated in different stages into an area that was inhabited by Albanians since antiquity. In Kosovo, the Albanian population consisted equally of resident Albanians and newcomers from central and northern Albania.

**Religion**

Since the early Middle Ages, the southwestern Balkans had been a frontier area between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Since the emergence of Bulgarian and Serbian ecclesiastical
traditions, Balkan Orthodoxy consisted of three power centers (Constantinople, Peć, Ohrid) and liturgical cultures. Southern Albania and parts of Macedonia were influenced by the Byzantine (Greek) culture of the Patriarchate of Constantinople; Bulgarian and Serbian ecclesiastical influence overlapped in central and northern Macedonia with spill-overs to southern Albania. Its share in Bulgarian ecclesiastical culture goes back to the Slavic missionary activities emanating from Ohrid in the late ninth and tenth centuries. Northern Albania, mainly its coastal parts, belonged to the Roman Catholic Church’s Adriatic world. Central Albania constituted a borderland with areas of blurred transition between the confessions. Local noblemen changed their confessional loyalty according to the political situation. In Kosovo, Serbs, Albanians, and Vlachs were almost exclusively Orthodox, adhering to the Patriarchate of Peć, which had been authorized against the wishes of the Byzantine Patriarchate of Constantinople by the Serbian Tsar Stefan Dušan as rival ruler of Serbs and Greeks in 1346. The tiny medieval Catholic community in Kosovo consisted of Saxon miners, merchants, and investors from Dubrovnik and northern Albanian Catholic clergymen.

As elsewhere in Islamic states, conquest did not lead to immediate Islamization (with the exception of Shkodra). In the Balkan southwest, Islamization was a protracted process that was stopped only by the collapse of Ottoman rule in 1912. It most affected areas which suffered massive destruction in the fifteenth century, mainly central Albania, while the Orthodox framework in the south remained fairly intact. In the northwest, the partial destruction of the Catholic ecclesiastical network facilitated, as it did in Bosnia, the advance of Islam. However, also as in Bosnia, Catholic (mainly Franciscan) monasteries survived, and despite serious difficulties, the Roman Church held its outposts in tribal mountain areas. Ties with the Bosnian Franciscans were strong and resulted in cultural exchange (the first Albanian book, Gjon Buzuku’s Missale, published in 1555, was printed in a script influenced by the Bosnian Cyrillic alphabet used by the Bosnian Franciscans).

Islamization gained momentum in the seventeenth century when the majority of Albanians converted to the imperial religion. There were several reasons for this. Because of their long wars against Venice and the Habsburgs, the Ottomans had to increase taxes, a burden which fell mainly on Christian subjects. Changing religion was often the only way to avoid economic disaster. In certain cases, as a reprisal after failed uprisings as in 1689, forced conversions and deportations contributed to Islamization. The Catholic Church was perceived by the Ottomans as a political threat and had to suffer much more than the Orthodox church from politically motivated restrictions. Recent research highlights also the impact of Sunni Konfessionalisierung (confessionalization) starting in the late sixteenth century, namely an increase of intolerance towards Christians and a renewal of the “holy war” (against Venice in 1645, against the Habsburgs in 1683) inspired by the Kadızadeli movement, a conservative and militant Sunni movement with strong anti-Sufi and anti-Christian tendencies. The impact of this phenomenon on the Balkan southwest still deserves to be studied more in detail.

The Islamization of the majority of Albanians was a remarkable phenomenon in modern European history. Around 1700, a new self-denomination of the Albanians emerged. Shqiptar (from the verb shqiptoj, to speak in a way that can be understood) designated an Albanian society whose very nature had been radically altered by the adoption of Islam and a cultural reorientation towards the Islamic East. The term was gradually also adopted by Christian Albanians and replaced the term Arbër. The latter represented the Christian tradition of the Albanians now deemed obsolete. In a regional context, only Serbs adopted shqiptar (şiptar, with a pejorative connotation nowadays), while all other European peoples and the Ottomans continued to use terms derived from Arbër to designate the Albanians (e.g. the Greek Arvanites or the Italian Albanesi).
The Orthodox church of the Byzantine rite accommodated to the Ottoman system. Southern Albanian developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into a flourishing Orthodox regional culture with its own printing center in the Vlach trading town of Voskopoja/Moschopolis in the mid-eighteenth century. The Serbian Patriarchate of Peć vanished after the end of Serbian statehood (1459), but it was restored in 1557 as Ottoman political leverage for bringing all Slavic Orthodox people in the Balkans under its control, including potentially Orthodox Slavic subjects of Venice and the Habsburg Monarchy, the regional Catholic powers. Only when the Serbian patriarchs repeatedly supported uprisings against the Empire did the Ottomans support the decision of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to abolish the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć and the autocephalous archbishopric of Ohrid in 1766/67. Greek clergy were appointed to bring all Orthodox of the Ottoman Balkans under the direct rule of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In terms of numbers, Islamization mainly affected Balkan Orthodox Christians (Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Vlachs). While Catholic priests reported continuously on cases of defection from the much smaller Catholic communities, conversion processes are less known in their case. In the late nineteenth century, Serbian nationalists advanced the idea that Kosovo Muslim Albanians were in fact Islamized and Albanianized Serbs (so-called Arnautaši). This idea links Islam to the Albanian language and implies that adopting Islam meant automatically switching to the language of the largest Muslim group in Kosovo.

Religious groups were marriage pools. Muslims chose mainly Muslim partners (or Christian women who had to adopt Islam voluntarily or forcefully). Orthodox married other Orthodox (marriages with Muslims unavoidably led to conversion to Islam). Religion prevailed, not language. The Islamic and the Orthodox communities were both multilingual. In Kosovo, Serbian idioms were dominant among Orthodox, while most Muslims spoke Albanian. People usually adapted to the dominant linguistic environment of their respective religious group. While Orthodox Albanians married into Slavic Orthodox families, converted Slavs had to find partners in the Muslim community. Both tendencies could lead to linguistic acculturation. These processes certainly happened, but they cannot be quantified. However, neither Kosovo Albanians nor Kosovo Serbs constituted ethnically “pure” groups as propagated by modern nationalists of both sides.

Although modern concepts of ethnic identity should not be mechanically projected back into the early modern period, it would also be misleading to ignore identity patterns that were related to language and culture. Albanians obviously felt their linguistic distinctiveness in comparison with surrounding communities. Muslim Albanian identity in Kosovo and Macedonia evolved around language, customary law, faith, and Ottoman Muslim privileges, such as the right to bear arms, a dominant social position in daily life, legal privileges in lawsuits against Christians, and virtual immunity in cases of violence against Christians. The Orthodox had none of these privileges, placing them clearly in an inferior position to the Muslims. In the Adriatic lands, however, especially in northern and central Albania, language did not divide Christians and Muslims. In southern Albania, Albanian Orthodox were well integrated in the Orthodox community dominated by Greeks and Vlachs. In the multiple churches of the Serbian Patriarchate, frescoes commemorated medieval Serbian kings, and church tradition constantly referred to medieval Serbian statehood. However, there is almost no non-religious evidence for the ethnic identity of Orthodox peasants in early modern Kosovo. In southern Albania, Orthodox clergymen such as Kosmas Aitolos (died 1779) insisted on clear demarcation of the multilingual Orthodox flock from Catholics and Jews. Ethnic difference existed in early modern Balkans, but it did not gain political importance as national identity until the late
nineteenth century. Religious communities constituted the main frame of reference, and they sometimes bridged differences in language.

**Albanian Sunni Muslims as a pillar of Ottoman rule**

It took the Ottomans more than 150 years to take full control of Albania, the historical region stretching from Lake Shkodra to Epirus. As already noted, nowhere in the Balkans had resistance been stiffer than in parts of this area. However, nowhere in the Balkans had conversion to Islam led to such a clear Muslim majority. By 1800, Christians had almost completely disappeared in central Albania. In Kosovo and Macedonia, the remaining Catholic Albanians constituted a tiny minority. In southern and northern Albania, Christianity had survived a little better. The reasons for this massive conversion to Islam, which made the Albanians (next to the Bosniaks) the only modern European nation with a Muslim majority, are the object of ongoing debates in the region.

By the fifteenth century, Albanians had started to join the Ottoman army and administration. Together with Bosnian Muslims, they formed a powerful interest group in Constantinople by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As also in the case of the Bosnian Muslims, these kinship-based networks could include Christian relatives. Communication with the major powers of early modern Europe, from the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires to Spain and Venice, was facilitated by the multi-religious Albanian family networks stretching across the eastern and central Mediterranean and into Southeast and East Central Europe. Muslim Albanians became prominent in the Ottoman ruling hierarchy, and dozens of Albanians rose to the position of Grand Vezir. Koca Sinan Pasha from the highland of Luma (west of Prizren) conquered Georgia (1580), built a mosque in Cairo, but also remembered his homeland by creating a religious foundation in the strategically important defile of Kaçanik. Muslim Albanians played a significant role in Ottoman campaigns in Hungary in the seventeenth century. The Kreshnik epic song demonstrates that Bosnian and Albanian Muslims shared common memories. Other epic songs in Albanian celebrate Ottoman warfare against Habsburg troops on the Pannonian plains. The prominent position held by of Sunni Albanians helps to explain why Orthodox Serbs have equated Albanians with the resented Ottoman regime, an early modern legacy that remains an obstacle to regional reconciliation.

**Selected Readings**


