

THE BATTLE OF KOSOVA 1389

AN ALBANIAN EPIC

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I. Introduction

“Once there was a Sultan Murat...” Thus begins the Albanian epic on the Battle of Kosova.¹ This is the story of Murat, a Moses-like leader who performs miracles for his people and is destined to die as a martyr, and Kopiliq, the daring warrior with magic powers who kills Murat. The historical event that provides the background to this epic is Sultan Murat I’s Kosova campaign in the spring of 1389, culminating in a confrontation with the coalition of Balkan forces led by the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović.² Both the Sultan and the Prince were killed in a battle that apparently ended with no decisive victory in the field, or no immediate outcome, but signaled the weariness of local forces against the Ottomans. Seventy years later the last resistance was finally overcome; Kosova feudal lords lost their independence to the Ottomans, who established their rule over the entire region.

Compared with the fame of the Serbian epic songs on the same battle - centered on the characters of Prince Lazar the pious, Vuk Branković the traitor, and Miloš Obilić the loyal general and assassin of the Sultan -, knowledge of the Albanian epic is scarce. This is no surprise. The Albanian oral tradition has had a profound influence on national history and self-identification, but has not had the same worldwide recognition as the Serbian tradition, for the language itself is not widely known.³ In particular, the Albanian epic of the Battle of Kosova has never played the central role that the Serbian myth of Kosova played since the 19th century in building a national and regional identity.⁴ Yet, while the Serbian oral tradition seems to have died out in the second half of the 20th century, the Albanian oral tradition is still very much alive in Kosova.⁵ Its continuity demonstrates remarkable resilience against modernization, emigration, and even more direct threats: during the Milošević years and in the run up to the war, the Serbian police and army targeted singers and destroyed scholarly institutions where folk culture had been recorded and archived.⁶ The oral tradition survived despite of, or

maybe because of, the violent attempt to suppress it. It still adds new productions to a rich body of songs that are legendary tales of individual resistance played against an historical background.

I stumbled upon an Albanian song about the Battle of Kosova while I was researching the culture of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA), the guerrilla group formed in the 1990s to fight for independence from Serbia.⁷ In books by local historians I read that Miloš Obilić, the Serbian hero reputed to be the assassin of the Sultan, was instead the Albanian hero Millosh Kopiliq. Evidence of his Albanian origin was to be found in the epic song on the Battle and in folk wisdom, which locates Millosh's birth in Kopiliq, a hamlet in the rural area of Drenica. In Kosova, current popular history texts, but also school textbooks, have absorbed the oral tradition.

The possibility of an Albanian Kopiliq will come as a complete shock to a wider audience that admires Serbian epic poetry and knows the Serbian hero Obilić. In truth, no historical evidence confirms Kopiliq's Albanian origin, but no evidence confirms Obilić's Serbian origin either. The name Obilić for example, is an 18th century invention that two Serbian amateur but influential nationalist historians, Vasilije Petrović and Pavle Julinac, introduced.⁸ Obilić reflects the Serbian word *obilje*, which means "abundance." Before then, the assassin of the Sultan had always been known as Kobila, Kopiliq, Kobilić or other versions of that name by the same stem.⁹ The root here might be in an old Balkan substrat word, in Albanian *kopil* (child or bastard child), in Romanian *copil* (child) and in Serbian *kopile* (bastard child) or *kobila* (mare, from which *kobilić*, son of the mare).¹⁰ Since then, the medieval character named Kopiliq has only lived in the memory of the Battle of Kosova among the Albanians.

This book is dedicated to bringing to light the little known Albanian epic poetry on the Battle of Kosova as one of the neglected voices on that event, but not as an undiscovered "true" story. It is concerned with historiography only insofar as historiography is related to epic. There is certainly no "true" history of the Battle of Kosova outside the very simple facts that both armies suffered great losses and the two leaders died.¹¹ On all other aspects of the Battle, including the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Murat and Lazar, the accuracy of historical texts is elusive. Scholars who have studied early Ottoman, Byzantine and Italian sources agree on this. Those

early histories, as written texts, constitute a body of literature with the potential of establishing a hegemonic narrative, but they do not. They contain too many inconsistencies.

One reason for the variety of narratives that early historical sources on the Battle have provided is that the oral tradition, which tells more about the meanings of an event than the actual facts, has been incorporated in these texts, emerged from the texts, or developed alongside them. If it is true that “a good deal of medieval literature drew on popular oral tradition, rather than vice versa,”¹² something similar is also true of medieval history. By nature, oral tradition is made of a plurality of voices that do not crystallize events into a single storyline. Instead, they build memories and provide material for different narrative plots.¹³ As historical texts, through memories, fashion events into stories of a certain kind, they have shaped “romantic” national subplots of the Battle of Kosova.¹⁴ This multiplicity of stories matters, though is not to be equated to the confusing relativism proposed by the unifying and ideological notion that the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević espoused, when he argued: “Today, it is impossible to say what is historical truth and what is legend with the Battle of Kosova. This is no longer even important.”¹⁵

The purpose of this book is not simply to introduce a wider audience to an official Albanian discourse on the Battle of Kosova. It is to broaden the focus that has inevitably narrowed the otherwise excellent literature on this subject to two main concerns: debating the hold that the myth of the Battle of Kosova maintains on the political discourse of the Serbian nationalist elites, and critically distilling historical facts from that myth. Here, the idea is to enrich the understanding of what the Battle of Kosova meant, or means, to all participants and their progenies. In other words, by truly accepting the fluidity of oral and written sources, this research is a democratic project.

Notes

- 1 Among all the variants known to the author, only Dauti's song (1954) starts with the theme, "Praise be to the Lord Almighty, once there was a Prince Lazar" (1-2). Dauti is the singer whose performance Çetta recorded and published in 1954. In this book, all the quotations from the songs are attributed to the singers, not to the scholars who recorded them.
- 2 The battle took place on the 15th of June of the Julian calendar, the 28th in the modern calendar.
- 3 On the lagging fortunes of the Albanian epic songs see the Introduction to the first English translation of Albanian heroic songs by Elsie and Mathie-Heck (2004). Their recording and collection is relatively recent. Earlier research on traditional epic songs of the Albanian communities in Italy was completed in the 19th century by mostly *arbëresh* scholars and only in Italian (see bibliography in Koliqi 1937). The epic songs popular in the northern Albanian highlands were recorded much later and published in 1937 in Albanian thanks to the work of the Franciscan monks Bernardin Palaj and Donat Kurti. There are subsequent Kosovar collections published in 1952 (Dančetović) and 2007 (Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës). Between the two World Wars, German Albanologists published a few songs but a major collection is archived in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard (<http://cgs119.harvard.edu/mpc/index.html>). The Albanian section of the Collection is the work of Albert Lord, who conducted research across northern Albania in 1937. However, it is the selection of songs from Bosnia Herzegovina in the same Collection that has attracted the attention of English-speaking scholars. Before the translations by Robert Elsie there are only a few good English monographs on the Albanian heroic songs (Skendi 1954; Pipa 1978 and Kolsti 1990). The spread of South Slavic epic songs beyond local boundaries has a different history (Koljević 1980, 2-5). Starting from the 15th century, learned people mostly hailing from Dalmatia began to write down epic poems. These poems then made their way to history texts in Italian and English and came to the attention of major literary figures of the European Romantic movement, from Goethe to Herder and Madame de Staël, at the

- same time that the Serbian linguist Vuk Karadžić published his first collection (1845).
- 4 See Emmert (1990) and Popović ([1974] 1998) on the Kosova myth. See also below, page 18, on the reach of the Kosova myth beyond Serbian nationalism.
 - 5 This is true mostly in the Rugova highlands, and the areas of Llapi, Drenica and Shala of Bajgora, but also in northern Albania and among some singers in Montenegro.
 - 6 Neziri (2006, 169); Elsie and Mathie-Heck (*ibid.*, XIV); more detailed information was gathered from Albanologist Arbnoza Dushi in November 2008, during a series of conversation on her research on the difficult development of folklore studies in Kosova.
 - 7 Di Lellio and Schwander-Sievers (2006a and 2006b).
 - 8 On these two Serbian historians see Petrovich (1956, 9-13). Vasilije Petrović, the archimandrite of Cetinje, is most notable for his aggressive foreign policy and a slim history exaggerating Montenegro's continuity as an independent nation from the Ottomans; it was published in Moscow in 1754 to court favors from Russia. Julinac was an amateur historian who nevertheless exerted a great influence on this contemporaries and beyond for being the first Serb to publish a history of the Serbian people (1765) that broke with the medieval chronicles.
 - 9 For a clear and short discussion on the etymology of Serbian and Albanian names of the hero, see Malcolm (1998, 73-74).
 - 10 Kostić (1934-1935, 252); Subotić (1932, 87- 88) and Hasluck (1936, 231).
 - 11 In one interpretation (Pirraaku 1990), the whole Battle is an invention; a conspiracy concocted by Murat's son Bayezit and Lazar's son Stefan to accelerate the succession. This thesis is proposed also by Kadare (1994, 22) as one of the most plausible accounts of the killing of Murat, a context in which the Battle of Kosova remains a symbol of brotherhood for all the Balkans.
 - 12 Darnton (1984, 17).
 - 13 My whole research is heavily indebted to the studies on the oral tradition developed by Alessandro Portelli and succinctly presented in an essay on methodology, "What Makes Oral History Different" (1991, 45-98).
 - 14 In Hayden White's discussion on the different forms that the historical narrative takes, the romantic form is the one founded on epic (1973, 7).
 - 15 From the speech delivered at Gazimestan on June 28, 1989, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the Battle (Milošević 2001, 7).
 - 16 As I was doing research for this essay as well as teaching at the Kosovo Institute for Journalism and Communication, I discussed Kopiliq with my students and that same week an unsigned article