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The Tradition of Wedding Gifts in Albanian Families during the Middle Ages (1368 -1451)

Ortaçağ Arnavut Ailelerinde Evlilik Hediyeler Geleneği (1368-1451)

Abstract

An important feature to which Arbanon families during the Middle Ages paid a special attention on the occasion of marriage were the dowries, gifts and various privileges, which were given not only by family members but also by a wider ring. In the Middle Ages, in the Arbanon lands, on the occasion of a girl marriage, the giving of the dowry was practiced, which was usually given in the form of a real estate or money (perpera, exagia).¹ The dowry was practiced by noble families as well as by other society strata. Certainly, the value of the dowry within Arbanon noble families was greater, thus certain lands were given. The aim of this paper was not only to introduce or point out the type or value of the dowry and gifts, but also to review some samples, as far as the documentary data provides, in order to point out their role and status in the marriage, because the dowry given to a girl was an exclusive right of her and then of her husband, which could be used accordingly to their needs or requirements, since it might have positively affect the economic condition of a family. Of course, noble albanian families had a higher dowry value where usually were given certain territories. The dowry was usually given by parents and there were occasions when dowry was given by authorized persons. In addition to dowry, different presents were provided not only by family members or relatives, but also by leaders of neighboring countries at the time of marriage. Such presents were mentioned on the occasion of the marriage of Gjergj II Strazimir, Balsha III, as well as Gjergj Kastrioti-Skënderbeu.

Key words: Albania, middle ages, wedding gifts

Öz

Ortaçağ dönemindeki Arbëriyalı (Arnavut) ailelerinin evlilik esnasında önem ve ilgi gösterdikleri unsurlarından biri çeyiz hediyeleridir. Bu hediyeler, sadece yakın aile tarafından değil, akraba ve dostlardan da verilemkteydi. Ortaçağ Arbëriyalıların evlilik hediyesi genellikle gayri menkûl veya nakit para (perperë, heksagie) olmuştur. Bazen de ev eşyaları veya daha değerli eşyalar hediye olarak verilmiştir. Evlilik hediye alışkanlığı soylu ailelerde olsa da, orta ve düşük geliri olan aileler de uygulamışlardır. Soylu ailelerin hediye değeri yüksek meblağlarda olup çoğu zamanda evlilik hediyesi

1 *Perpera* was a silver coin issued and used by Ragusa and neighboring areas; *exagia* was a golden coin used during the Middle Age.

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(çeyiz) olarak belli topraklar verilmiştir.

Evlilik Hediyesi (Çeyiz) genellikle ebeveynler tarafından verilirdi. Onların yokluğunda kardeşleri veya temsilen üçüncü kişiler tarafından verildiği bilinmektedir. Evlilik hediyesi (çeyiz)'nin yanı sıra, düğün vesilesiyle sadece aile veya diğer akrabalar tarafından değil, komşu ülke liderleri tarafından da çeşitli hediyeler verme geleneği uygulanmıştır. Benzer bir uygulamaya II. Gjergj Stratizmir'inin torunu'nun evlilik esnasında, III. Balşa ve Gjergj Kastriot İskendebeu'de görülmüştür.

Anahtar kelimeleri: Arnavutluk, Ortaçağ, Evlilik Hediyeleri (Çeyiz).

Introduction

An important feature to which Arbanon² families during the Middle Ages paid a special attention on the occasion of marriage were the dowries, gifts and various privileges, which were given not only by family members but also by a wider ring. In the Middle Ages, in the Arbanon lands, on the occasion of a girl marriage, the giving of the dowry was practiced, which was usually given in the form of a real estate or money (*perpera*, *exagia*).³ The dowry was practiced by noble families as well as by other society strata. Certainly, the value of the dowry within Arbanon noble families was greater, thus certain lands were given. The aim of this paper was not only to introduce or point out the type or value of the dowry and gifts, but also to review some samples, as far as the documentary data provides, in order to point out their role and status in the marriage, because the dowry given to a girl was an exclusive right of her and then of her husband, which could be used accordingly to their needs or requirements, since it might have positively affect the economic condition of a family.

The dowry was mainly given by the parents, in their absence by the brothers, and sometimes even by entrusted individuals; its value depended primarily on the economic condition and social rank of a family. The richer the family, the bigger the dowry was given to the girl. Numerous documentary sources referring to this issue prove that furniture and other valuable assets were given as a dowry in addition to real estate and money. In this view, in 1368 Luka from Bar⁴ gave one-third of his property to his daughter who was marrying a Ragusan.⁵ On the 4th of February 1400 Mark Thani from Ulcinj declared to have received a dowry of eight hundred *perpera* and one hundred *exagia* on behalf of his wife,⁶ whereas Marince Bratoslaviq from Ulcinj, on 7th of August 1400 declared to have received fifty large *perpera*, a bed with furniture, including twenty additional *perpera*, as a dowry on behalf of his wife Juliana, daughter of Kobelle de Barrullo, residing in Ragusa.⁷ Even a Tomko Ratmanoviq, so-called Vella, testified on 23rd February 1401 to have received five hundred *perpera* on behalf of his wife Katrina, daughter of Marince from Bar.⁸ This kind of dowry continued in the early years of century XV. As proved by documents of

2 The Albanians appear in medieval Byzantine chronicles in the eleventh century as *Albanoi* and *Arbanitai*, in the fourteenth century Latin sources as *Albanenses* and *Arbanenses*, or in Serbian medieval sources as *Arbanasi*. ... read further: *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, Vol. I, Toena, Tiranë, 2002, 206; Robert Elsie, *Fjalori historik i Shqipërisë*, Eugen, Tiranë, 2011, 48-49.

3 *Perpera* was a silver coin issued and used by Ragusa and neighboring areas; *exagia* was a golden coin used during the Middle Age.

4 Bar (Tivar – in Albanian) is a city in today's Montenegro and it was known in medieval period as: *Antivarion* or *Antibarium*.

5 Ludovicus Thalloczy-Costantinus Jeriček-Emilianus Sufflay, *Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia*, vol. II, Vindobonae. 1913-1918, 58.

6 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. I, Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë--Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë. 1987, 76.

7 Ibid, 128.

8 Ibid, 175.

the time, Nikola declared on 10th of November 1401 to have received a dowry of two thousand five hundred and fifty four *perpera* and one hundred *exagia* on behalf of his wife Perve, daughter of Milutin from Ulcinj.⁹ On 9th May 1407 Marin Dabivizi, from Scutari, stated to have received a dowry of six hundred *perpera* on behalf of his wife Slavisa.¹⁰

However, there were cases when the dowry was given by brothers or other entrusted individuals. Such cases were mentioned on 20th and 27th of November 1400. In the first case, Gjon Progni Laiblemi from Durres (named *Dyrrachium* during the Ancient period), a tailor by occupation, resident in Ragusa, declared to have received a dowry of two hundred coins from Dobrulla Milcenoc, brother of his wife Stanka, a daughter of the late Miltine.¹¹ While in the second case Shtjefen Marini from Ulcinj testified that as a dowry, on behalf of his wife Domenika, daughter of the late Nikolle Spani from Drishti (*Drivastum* or *Drivasto* during Middle Ages) or, received two hundred *perpera* from his brother-in-law Don Pjetër Spani.¹² In turn, through a testament, Vlasna - the mother of Don Pjetër Spani, left her entire movable and immovable property to Don Pjetër; she justified that Don Pjetër Spani, following the death of his father Nikolle Spani, with his assets in cash and movable property that he had earned, facilitated the marriage of his two sisters, giving them an appropriate dowry as he agreed with their husbands.¹³ The giving of a dowry by a brother was also mentioned in a document dated 28th of July 1403, when Dhimitër Zvetkovi, a shoemaker by occupation, testified that on behalf of his wife Domusha, a daughter of the late Pribosh from Bar, received one hundred and ten *perpera* from Domusha's brother, priest Domenik.¹⁴

In specific cases, the dowry was also given by entrusted individuals, aside from the brothers. On 19th December 1402 a girl named Marusha entrusted (proxy)¹⁵ his uncle Menze Cudrouich from Bar, to arrange her marriage with any man his uncle may chose, but with a specific condition – the promises and liabilities concerning the dowry should not exceed two hundred golden coins and that clothes and ornaments to be in accordance to the city habits where Marusha goes as a bride.¹⁶ A document dated 17th January 1405 indicates that Frank Zivki Dabojeviq has declared to have received one hundred and fifty *perpera* as a dowry from Simon Nikoliqi from Bar, the uncle of his wife Stana.¹⁷ On 19 January 1404, Damko – a son of a man from Bar, declared that he had received on behalf of his wife Marusha, daughter of the late Stagno Nesnoviq, a dowry of two hundred *perpera* from Miltin Pribojeviq and Tomko Grampa – custodians of Stagno's heirs. About the remaining two hundred *perpera* he said to have given a half of Stagno's house, which was a joint property with the heirs of Stagno's brothers.¹⁸ Even Miroslav Krenetiq, declared on 9th October 1411, to have received from Don Mateu from Ulcinj, chapelan of mister Marin Bona, fifty *perpera* on behalf of his wife Gojka, a daughter of Jursi.¹⁹

After the death of the wife, the husband was forced to give the dowry back to the wife's relatives or to distribute it to her children, if she had any. A specific case of giving the dowry back

9 Ibid, 250.

10 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. II (1406-1410), Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike-Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë. 2019, 264.

11 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. I, 158.

12 Ibid, 158.

13 Ludovicus Thalloczy, et. al. *Acta et diplomata res Albaniae*, 210.

14 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. I, 444.

15 Proxy: in the practice of civil acts the proxy was in charge of protecting the interests of those he represented.

16 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. I, 358.

17 Ibid, 552-553.

18 Ibid, 480.

19 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. III (1411-1415), Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike-Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë. 2018, 179.

was the one of Marushe from Ulcinj. Upon her and her husband's death, her brother Don Mateu and brothers of her husband, Milloje and Vitiko, claimed their heirs over the dowry. An understanding was reached and dispute was transferred to their entrusted individuals for a solution: Mate Bicje, Anthonia Butku and Stipkum de Vocinja. The parties declared to obey to the arbitration and to respect it, otherwise the one rejecting it would be fined with fifty *perpera*, which would be paid to Ragusa authorities.²⁰

Despite all, there were cases when a wife lost her right over the dowry, and this happened in case of an adultery (*adultere*). On 28th of March 1414 a case was cited, when Nikolata – the wife of Marsili from Ulcinj, was accused of committing an adultery. She was sentenced with four month of jail; she also lost her dowry, which was given to her husband. Two month of jail were also given to the man with whom Nikolata was involved in an adultery.²¹ The documents in question are just some examples of a dowry giving in form of currency, whose value, as we saw, was 50 to 2554 *perpera*, with some small objections where a part of a house, ornaments or other valuable items were given as a dowry. As mentioned above, the value of the dowry depended on the social and economic status of the family. More advanced or richer – the dowry was greater; the dowry also depended from the social rank of the family where the girl got married. In the case of Albanian nobleness, the marriage was, at first instance, a political act. It aimed to reinforce the political and economic position of feudal families and to ensure the transfer of the holdings to lawful heirs. The marriage was concluded in a form of a contract, providing among others the dowry to be brought by a bride.²² In this view there is a dowry that Gjergj Arianiti gave to his daughter Donika, when she got married with George Castriota Skanderbeg in 1451.²³ According to Barleti, Skanderbeg's marriage contract was drafted by Muzake Topia;²⁴ the dowry had to be evaluated by the father-in-law and was accepted as he decided: worthy for the donator, worthy for the recipient.²⁵ Although it was not mentioned specifically what Gjergj Arianiti gave as a dowry to Donika, anyway there is an opinion that the dowry contained money and lands. It was also said that, just because of a high dowry value, the sons of Gjergj Arianiti didn't participate to the wedding party of their sister Donika with George Castriota Skanderbeg.²⁶

The issue of the dowry occupied an important position within the Statutes of Scutari, which were on power since the first part of century XIV. These statutes regulated the giving and use of the dowry: a dowry could not be a property released for rent, regardless if they are vineyards, fields or houses;²⁷ in case the dowry vineyards or fields were cultivated, then the affiliation of the fruits had to be determined, otherwise they were calculated on the favour of the assignee.²⁸ By these statutes was forbidden to give foreign property as a dowry, and penalties were provided for the ones abusing it.²⁹ On the occasion of the marriage girls benefited a dowry from wealth of their parents, and according to these statutes, the remaining wealth belonged only to sons, except where there no male heirs.³⁰ According to these statutes, brothers of a girl hold the right to give a dowry and this was practiced when a girl had no parents.³¹ Since the dowry was an exclusive right

20 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. II, 378-379.

21 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. III, 510-511.

22 Aleks Luarasi, "E drejta në shtetin e Skënderbeut", *Studime për Epokën e Skënderbeut* 3, Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë-Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë. 1989, 41.

23 Fan Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, Rilindja, Prishtinë. 1968, 110.

24 Marin Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, Rilindja, Prishtinë, 1989, 291.

25 *Ibid*, 291.

26 Fan Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, 110.

27 *Statutet e Shkodrës në gjysmën e parë të shekullit XIV me shtesat deri më 1469*, përgatitur nga Lucia Nadin, Onufri, Tiranë, 2010, Head: 43.

28 *Ibid*, Head: 44.

29 *Ibid*, Head: 163.

30 *Ibid*, Head: 162.

31 *Ibid*, Head: 160.

of a wife, its use could be done only after her consent. Thus, if husband took something from the dowry, even with the consent of his wife, he was forced to give it back and to fill it up from his own property.³² Furthermore, the women also had the right, while drafting a testament, to leave a portion of their dowry for their soul prayers.³³

The dowry was considered as something very significant and its abuse represented a serious obstacle for the men who seek to get married again.³⁴ Therefore, as provided by these statutes, when a man lost his wife and seeks to get married again, if he has no children with his first wife, he should initially hand over the dowry of his first wife to her relatives. If he doesn't obey this rule, he cannot get a second wife.³⁵ Beside that, if a man has a child with his first wife, and if the children of his first wife didn't receive the dowry of their mother because their father was alive, when he marries a second woman and has children with her, at first he should set aside the dowry of his first woman, namely the mother of the children.³⁶ In fact, the Statutes of Scutari not only regulated the dowry issue, but at first they protected and strengthened the right of women to keep and use it, as she perceived it.

In the case of marriages between aristocratic families, various gifts were made not only by family or other relatives, but also by the leaders of neighbouring countries. Such gifts were made by Ragusa on the occasion of the wedding of the granddaughter of George II (the second) Strazimir, as well as Balsha III (the third). At the beginning of October 1395, George II Strazimiri had begun wedding preparations for his niece. Ragusans have been informed about this event. In this regard, on October 30th 1395 in Ragusa was decided to participate in the celebrations on the occasion of the wedding that was being prepared in Ulcinj.³⁷ Certainly, in addition to the participants, the Major Council in Ragusa had decided to send some gifts to George II Strazimir. In fact, on November 31st and December 1st 1395, the Major Council of Ragusa had decided to donate a quantity of precious cloth to him.³⁸ On the occasion of the marriage of Balsha III with the daughter of Koja Zaharia³⁹ the Senate of Ragusa convened the Minor Council and the Major Council to decide on the ambassadors who would attend the ceremony, as well as the gift that would be given. On this issue the Minor Council and the Major Council of Ragusa discussed from 8 to 25 November 1412.⁴⁰ On November 11th 1412, in the Senate, which consisted of 32 people, two proposals were presented; the first to make a gift worth 600 *perpera*, while the second proposal that the value of the gift be up to 800 *perpera*.⁴¹ These two proposals were forwarded to the Major Council, which consisted of 98 people. Apparently, the second proposal passed in the Major Council with a total of 55 votes,⁴² namely the gift is worth up to 800 *perpera*. On November 11th 1412, the Major Council of Ragusa discussed the ways how to prepare the persons who will represent the Republic at the wedding of Balsha III. It was decided to send two ambassadors, and each of them to be given 40 *perpera*; then it was decided to be given two armed boats as well as six servants and each servant to be given 4 coins per month. The daily expenses of ambassadors and servants going to Balsha's wedding party were covered. They received two and a half of *perpera* per day, but to give back if something

32 Ibid, Head: 165.

33 Ibid, Head: 196.

34 Ermal Baze, *Një qytet me statute, Shkodra në gjysmën e parë të shekullit XIV*, Muzgu, Tiranë. 2013, 168.

35 *Statutet e Shkodrës në gjysmën e parë të shekullit XIV me shtesat deri më 1469*, Head: 172.

36 Ibid, head:173.

37 Giuseppe Gelcich, *Zeta dhe dinastia e Balshajve*, "55", Tiranë. 2009, 197.

38 Ibid, 197.

39 Pranvera Bogdani, *Balshajt lufta e principatës së Balshajve dhe të sundimtarëve të tjerë shqiptarë kundër Venedikut në 20 vjetët e parë të shek. XV*, Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike-Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë. 2018, 182.

40 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. III, 333, 334, 335, 343, 344, 345.

41 Ibid, 333-334.

42 Ibid, 355.

remains from this money.⁴³ On November 18th 1412, the Major Council of Ragusa appointed two ambassadors to attend Balsha's wedding. Saracen Bona and Nikolle Gondola have been chosen.⁴⁴ Regarding the wedding of Balsha III, two additional decisions were taken in Ragusa on November 24th and 25th 1412. On November 24th 1412, three people were chosen to buy the gift to be given to Balsha III,⁴⁵ while on November 25th, Ragusa decided to make a payment slip for the ambassadors going to Balsha III.⁴⁶

Even George Castriota-Skanderbeg, on the occasion of his marriage to Donika in April 1451,⁴⁷ received numerous gifts from local nobles, as well as from Venice and Ragusa. According to Barleti, the neighbouring princes and almost all the nobles of Epirus, either took part in that miracle themselves with a very large suit and magnificent gifts, or sent congratulations and representatives with the most beautiful gifts. The Venice Senate had also sent gifts from the state treasury.⁴⁸ As about the gifts that came to Skanderbeg from Alfonso, Barleti says that they were so large that Skanderbeg did not want to keep them, but finally king's envoys forced him to take them; king sent him additional gifts, such as horses, slaves, and other items of barbarians and the belongings of defeated enemies, as was his tradition.⁴⁹ In addition to tradition, gifts were made to maintain or relax the relationship between them, as well as to prove the friendship, as Barleti cited.⁵⁰

Based on documentary data we may conclude that the dowry was an important and legally systematized factor of a private right. As a tradition, the dowry was given not only by parents but also by brothers, and by other entrusted individuals. There are two issues proving that the dowry was a factor that influenced the marriage relationships: first, agreements concerning the dowry before the marriage, and second – marriages arranged between noble families. Giving gifts on the occasion of marriage also conveyed a certain message, particularly when the gift was made by local nobles and leaders of neighbouring countries.

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43 Ibid, 335-337.

44 Ibid, 343.

45 *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë të shek.XV*, vol. III, 344.

46 Ibid, 345.

47 Fan Noli, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu*, 110.

48 Marin Barleti, *Historia e Skënderbeut*, 292.

49 Ibid, 292.

50 Ibid.

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