

ISTL Albania Newsletter

Scanderbeg, Champion of Christ

*It was a warm spring evening when I asked the foreign girl “Skanderbeg, the Albanian national hero, you know him, don’t you?”
“No,” she replied to my surprise.*

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Through this special edition newsletter, I want to present to you Scanderbeg, not just as the Albanian hero, but as the “AthletaChristy”, Champion of Christ.[1]

George Kastriot (Scanderbeg) was born in Kruja, as the son of John Kastriot. When John was forced to submit to the Ottomans, George and his three other brothers were sent as hostages to Sultan Murat II. There, they were circumcised, converted to Islam, and trained to be in the army. They even changed George’s name to Iskandar (Alexander) after The Great Alexander. Later he gained the title beg and that is why we know him as Scanderbeg.

Because of his skills in the duel, Scanderbeg gained a grand reputation before the Sultan, so he sent him out to fight the Christians in Hungary and Greece. In this war, Scanderbeg behaved in a way to protect the Christians as much as he could, because in his heart he was a friend of theirs, but he was careful enough not to let the Turkish army understand his intentions.

After the defeat of the Turkish army by the famous Hungarian general John Hunyadi, Scanderbeg abandoned the Turkish camp, gave up Islam, and got back his family castle in Kruja. Through the 25 years that passed, with the support now and then of Venice, Napoli, and the Papacy, but with an army that rarely included even 20,000 men, he defeated successfully 13 successive attacks from the most powerful and technologically advanced army of that time.

Scanderbeg is praised for the defense that he provided for his fatherland, but in reality, it wasn't just about his fatherland. He helped other countries against the enemy of Christianity. Hungary and Poland asked Scanderbeg for help and he raised an army of 1,000 Epirots to help them. But, when he was on the borders of Serbia, he was not allowed to go through the place and was kept there for too long and could not arrive in time, consequently, the Hungarians and Poles had to fight alone. The end of that battle was painful for the Christians, even the young King of Poland, Vladislav was killed. When Scanderbeg learned about the tragedy, he was at the border of Serbia and his anger grew so much that he burned and destroyed everything around the place.

Scanderbeg's victories marveled the world because the Turkish army had shocked Europe and Asia, but now it was being defeated by a small province. The Sultan Murat, understanding that dealing with Scanderbeg meant dealing with all Christianity and Persia, decided to lead the army himself, something that he had not done before. All Christianity was frightened but Scanderbeg was not and did not let Kruja fall into the hands of the Ottomans even though they tried everything. After this, Sultan Murat compared Scanderbeg to a voracious animal that should be avoided. Sultan Murat was this cruel only to Scanderbeg because in his nature he was gentle and gracious.

This gracious nature of his is shown through the forgiveness he offered to his traitor, Moses. Moses, an Epirot, was offered Epirus by the Sultan if he was to leave Scanderbeg. He accepted to betray Scanderbeg and asked Sultan for an army of 15,000 to fight him. At the end of the battle, he returned to Sultan with only 4,000 men and was in miserable condition. Sultan Mehmet decided to execute him right away but the army that was left convinced him not to, so in the end, he saved Moses' life. This man went back to Epirus and begged Scanderbeg for forgiveness and he not only forgave him but let him have the same honored position as before.

As long as he was alive, Scanderbeg was known all over the western world as a “defender of Christianity” and an “athlete of Christ”, meanwhile, after his death, several books were written to honor his deeds. The most famous one among others and the one that served as a source for the successive authors was *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum principis*, written by an Albanian priest, Marin Barleti, published in Rome 1508 – 1510. Later, this book was translated into English by Zachary Jones with the title *The historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albanie, containing his famous acts, his noble deeds of arms, and memorable victories against the Turks, for the faith of Christ*.

After the death of Scanderbeg, on 17 January 1468, Albania stood against the Turkish army for 12 years, but in 1478 the fall of Kruja happened and in 1480 Albania was occupied and was under the Ottoman regime until 1912 when it was declared independent.

Nowadays, Albania is known as a country with a Muslim majority, which sounds ironic, knowing that its national hero was a defender of Christianity. However, God is faithful to preserve His own. And it is because of this faithfulness that even after being the first atheist country, Albania not only has freedom of faith but also Bible school institutions, namely ISTL Albania, that help Christians to know their history, study the Word, grow in faith, and lead with virtues.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND LEADERSHIP started as a simple local church leadership training program in 2008 and is now operating as a three years Bachelor's program (it also has a joined venture with TCMII to operate a Master's program in Albania) to train leaders in all over the country, and even beyond. We praise God for everything that He is doing in the country of Scanderbeg and commit to being tools in His hands in order to follow our mission every day.

Notes

The book Scanderbeg in the northern places – Skënderbeu në vendet nordike (Lloshi & Quanrud, 2018) was a great help in writing this newsletter.



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