

Marin Barleti's Masterpiece, *The Siege of Shkodra*: A Historical Review

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Abstract: "*The Siege of Shkodra*" is regarded by Albanians as the first work of Albanian history by the first known Albanian author. The book was written in Latin in 1504 and was finally translated into English in 2012. The work describes the 1478–9 Ottoman siege of Shkodra, described by Franz Babinger as "one of the most remarkable episodes in the struggle between the West and the Crescent" (363). The work is organized into three large chapters called "books": Book One is introductory with attention to the situational background and the origins of the Turks; Book Two describes the massive Turkish attack and the heroic Albanian and Venetian defense; Book Three describes the sultan halting the attack, conquering smaller nearby citadels, and returning to Istanbul, where he soon would sign an accord with Venice, which ceded Shkodra to him as a prerequisite for peace.

Keywords: Shkodra; warfare; Ottoman Empire; Marin Barleti; Albania

1. Introduction

The Siege of Shkodra is both an event and a book. The event (1478) gave birth to the book; the book (1504) gave immortality to the event. The Shkodrans had been attacked unsuccessfully by the Ottomans in 1474—an unlikely defeat for the Turks, frustrating Mehmed II and his plans to march on Rome. Four years later, Mehmed sent an enormous force led by two commanders (the pasha of Rumelia and the pasha of Anatolia) and also went personally to ensure triumph. After heavy bombardment and five successive ground assaults, the Ottomans failed to take the Shkodra fortress. The warriors on the walls were invincible. Stunned by what Ottoman chronicler Tursun called "a merciless bloodbath, unprecedented in history," the sultan was forced to halt the attack and develop a new strategy: he would conquer the smaller citadels in Shkodra's vicinity (Žabljak, Drisht, and Lezha), leave a siege force at Shkodra to starve the besieged into surrender, and return to his palace in Istanbul. The besieged did not surrender, but were informed that a Venetian delegation had signed a peace treaty with Mehmed, a treaty which ceded their city to the Ottoman Empire. The Shkodrans had to choose emigration or subjugation; most chose emigration (Nadin, *Migrazioni*).

Marin Barleti, a Shkodran priest known also as Marinus Barletius or Marino Barlezio, was an eyewitness of the event and later wrote *De obsidione Scodrensi* (*The Siege of Shkodra*), dedicating it to the Venetian Senate in gratitude for receiving his beleaguered Shkodran compatriots into the bosom of the Republic. With the Ottoman Empire now pushing towards Rome and Vienna, *The Siege of Shkodra* captivated the attention of a large European readership obsessing over the possibility of what they had considered impossible—the Ottoman conquest of Western Europe (Elsie 35).

Barleti wrote a second book, *The History of Scanderbeg*, a seminal source of history about the premier Albanian hero. This book was larger than *The Siege of Shkodra* and became better known, more widely dispersed, and more influential because of Scanderbeg's unique role in history. Arguably, however, *The Siege of Shkodra* was Barleti's masterpiece, being written with the credibility of an eyewitness and with the passion of an exiled Shkodran citizen. Barleti wrote *The Siege of Shkodra* in Latin and it was translated into several European languages in the sixteenth century. In 1962—fifty years after Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire—the first Albanian version was published, a translation by Latin scholar Henrik Lacaj with historical comments by Aleks Buda. Surprisingly, no English version was produced until 2012, translated and edited by the author of this article. The following review and excerpts have been prepared in advance of publication of this English version (most quotations herein are from the yet unpaginated manuscript currently at press).

2. Barleti's prefatory note to the doge of Venice

In the preface of *The Siege of Shkodra*, Marin Barleti addresses the work to the doge of Venice, Leonard Loredan. Herein, Barleti honors the Senate who decided to harbor the Shkodrans after the siege; then he expresses his motivations for writing. He begins thus: "When something unusual occurs in the history of mankind, something exceedingly bitter and heavy, and for which to mourn, something we can assume has happened either to show the frailty

of man or to awaken a kind of compassion toward one another, then, usually, certain people emerge who not only have observed the bitter event with awe and pity, but who also attempt to pen it into life.”

Barleti then continues by suggesting that those who suffer deserve assistance, and that future generations should learn about the adversities of the past so that “their eyes will be opened wide enough to recognize how best to wield the helm that steers the affairs of men.” Barleti explains how he felt the moral obligation to “immortalize [the events of the siege] with a literary monument” but how inadequate he felt to actualize a work worthy of literary excellence. He nearly did not proceed, preferring to be silent “rather than to batter the ears of readers with an unrefined, unlovely book.” In the end, however, he labored on, persuaded by his conviction that it was his holy obligation to his fatherland and to his compatriots.

Marin Barleti was a Catholic priest. His work is filled with references to Holy Scripture and examples of the passionate Christian faith of his people. He tells the doge, “Here at the start I shall affirm that God gave the triumph to our faithful citizens when all hope had been lost.” Though living in exile, though his city was now in the Ottomans’ hands, and though the Shkodran churches were now being transformed into mosques, Barleti still views the bitter events as a triumph: first because the besieged repulsed the direct attacks of the Turks and only abandoned the city when Venice had ceded it to Mehmed II, and second because the Shkodrans had succeeded in delaying the Ottoman advance upon Christian European heartlands (Shpuza 218; Freely 137).

3. Book One: the situational background

Book One (one of three long “chapters” or “books”) provides background information according to the author’s understanding of history. Barleti attempts to handle the controversial origin of the Turks, conceding the existence of several differing points of view. He then discusses the Turks’ early conquests and how they amassed “unusual power,” becoming so mighty that “they could afford to battle their neighbors with impunity.” Then Barleti discusses the line of sultans from Osman to Mehmed II “The Conqueror,” the archenemy of his beloved city. Barleti describes the aftermath of Mehmed’s conquest of Constantinople by saying: “Concerning the horrors that followed, no man can express the massacre and bloodbath he unleashed against men and women of all ages! How many women and girls were violated! How many temples were desecrated! What unimaginable evil and crime was done out of spite and in order to blaspheme our true religion! No man can conjure the words to describe what happened there. No oratory can convey it, not even the oratory of tears.”

Book One continues with a summary of Mehmed’s conquests of Christian lands and his intention to “become lord of the entire world.” Crucial to the work at hand, Barleti points out that in order to realize his intention, Mehmed first needed to conquer the Albanian lands, because “no other land was more suitable, advantageous, and propitious to allow him to achieve his purpose and completely fulfill his dream.” The final significant stronghold in Mehmed’s way was Shkodra (Shpuza 222; Jacques 191). Barleti, therefore, concludes Book One with a history of Shkodra and its environs in order to explain why Mehmed would esteem it so highly. Barleti seems to admit that he shines brighter as a storyteller than a pure historian, so he concludes Book One by saying, “Now I shall attempt with all my being to bring to fruition what I have resolved to do.... I will be faithful to set forth everything I was privy to, all that I saw with my own eyes, everything I experienced myself.” This eyewitness experience—a rare look at fifteenth century siege warfare from inside a besieged fortress—sets Barleti’s work apart from his other works and distinguishes it as a gem of world historical literature (Martin-Leake 249).

4. Book Two: the sides battle

Book Two contains the bulk of Barleti’s material and describes the siege in detail. It opens with a brief account of the failed Ottoman siege of 1474—a conflict treated at greater length by Barleti’s contemporary George Merula in his text, “The War of Shkodra” (included in the new English and Albanian editions of *The Siege of Shkodra*). In the spring of 1478, Ottoman raiders were sent in advance of the main armies to blitz the countryside around Shkodra and induce panic. Many of the local women and children were sent to the seaside regions for greater safety, while villagers and the Shkodran citizens began to fortify their city with fresh passion. Barleti records, “They rested neither day nor night but worked constantly, body and soul, to properly complete all the work needed to bear the brunt of so great a war, not merely as if the enemy were right there in front of them, but because they were *indeed*.”

Soon, warriors began to amass in the environs of Shkodra. Davud Pasha of Rumelia arrived with an alleged “25,000 horses and 12,000 camels weighed down with munitions, bronze for artillery, and other military tools—all of which were unloaded around the hill.” Far from being passive and fearful, the Shkodrans began to attack the intruders and their tent

camps with guns and guerilla attacks. By June 8, the pasha of Anatolia had arrived—Mustafa Bey—with many thousands of riders divided into battalions. “The city,” says Barleti, “was abuzz with great crowds of barbarians. The influx was unceasing.”

On June 15 five thousand janissaries arrived. Barleti pauses here to describe how janissaries were conscripted and trained, being “snatched away from their [Christian] parents” and trained rigorously for service as the sultan’s elite guard (Mikaberidze 273). Their arrival was met with “an explosive tumult of applause” because it signaled the imminent arrival of the sultan.

Three days later, a small delegation from the sultan requested an audience with the besieged, urging them to surrender. The ultimatum was simple: surrender and be rewarded or resist and be tortured and killed. The Shkodrans replied by affirming their faith in Christ as opposed to Muhammad and their allegiance their Venetian commander as opposed to the Turkish sultan. In no uncertain terms, the Shkodrans affirmed that there would be no negotiations, no compromises, and no surrender.

The Turks, therefore, continued to prepare their assault structures, casting cannons on site and building gabions and defensive structures in preparation for a massive attack. Ten thousand more camels arrived with metals and munitions. On June 22, the first two cannons became operational and fired stones weighing up to 288 pounds. More and more Ottoman soldiers flowed in to the Turkish camp as the Shkodrans watched incredulously from their parapets. Daily cannon fire would now continue unabated to ensure easy access through the outer walls.

The first days of July marked the grand arrival of the sultan and his chariots, military troops, and “grandiose accoutrements.” Barleti records that when he first viewed the Shkodran fortress, he exclaimed, “Oh, what a brilliant and lofty place the Eagle has chosen for herself and as the nest for her eaglets!” Barleti notes that by this time, so many Turks had arrived that “one’s eye could scarcely spot the narrowest gap between tents.” He cites “credible sources and those who previously served in the sultan’s army” who reported that “about 350,000 people may have participated in the siege of Shkodra.” Figures like this have often been criticized by historians as exaggerations (Babinger 359-368), but perhaps not grossly so, because the Ottoman chronicler Kivami records 100,000 Turkish soldiers being involved in just one of the general attacks of this conflict (Pulaha 119).

One of the most thrilling portions of Book Two is Friar Bartholomew’s speech to raise the morale of the Shkodrans who were understandably disheartened by the enemy hordes gathering beneath them. Bartholomew had fought well under Scanderbeg’s leadership before taking holy orders and commanded enormous respect on account of both his reputation as a soldier and his role as a spiritual shepherd. The friar first appealed to their faith, claiming that they had been assembled by the will of God so that their religion would “emerge unharmed and secure the height of radiance.” Then, lest they entertain thoughts of surrender, he argued that the sultan could not be trusted: “Do you really think, O Shkodrans, that after you surrender, he will pardon you? Do you think that the soulless Ottoman will leave you unscathed and untouched now that you have so played and pounded him [four years previously]? ... What think you? Shall he absolve you of all that blood? Will he let you simply walk away, without exacting retribution? Certainly not! He will carve up your flesh as a butcher slaughters the sheep. He will tear you limb from limb.” Bartholomew assured them that God was on their side, employing a string of Biblical examples of how God had saved his people from ruthless enemies and impossible situations—for example, the children of Israel from Pharaoh’s oppression in Egypt and Daniel from the lions’ den. He urged his people to be steadfast in prayer and confession and claimed that their destiny was nothing less than to “preserve the Catholic faith and all Christendom.” The friar affirmed that, though fewer in number, they were far superior warriors. Furthermore, their citadel was unassailable, being so well positioned on a precipitous hill. He asserted that ten of his men could “easily repulse a thousand attackers.” He concluded with a vision of eternal glory awaiting those who would strive well and die “for the faith.” The Shkodrans responded to the friar’s speech with renewed unity and an iron resolve.

Meanwhile, the Ottomans continued to bombard the walls with cannon fire. At this point in the text, Barleti begins giving daily tallies of the cannon shots against the city: thirty-six shots on July 2, thirty-five on July 3, two more artillery installed on July 4, forty-seven more shots on July 5, and so on. On July 6, the Ottomans introduced a new weapon into their arsenal—a “kind of cannon that they call a mortar, ... able to shoot fireballs onto the housetops in order to set the city ablaze.” Barleti describes the shrieking noise and comet-like appearance of this projectile and tells how difficult it was for the citizens to extinguish the fires caused throughout the city. Another mortar was soon introduced, firing 865-pound stones that exploded upon impact. Barleti writes, “Even though the centuries before us may boast of their manifold inventions, this creation of our age, along with others like it, surpasses them all.” Soon the Ottomans were firing eleven cannons, the largest of which shot 935-pound stones that were nine handbreadths in diameter. The threat of the Turkish artillery was so deadly that Shkodran sentries in the castle towers would order the church bells to be rung any time they

saw the Turks readying their cannons, so that the citizens could take cover. Soon there remained no fortified places and the citizens were forced to dig underground chambers for shelter.

By July 11, the outer walls were damaged enough that the sultan ordered the first of what would become five ground assaults. The sultan “unleashed the janissaries, azaps, and other soldiers to assault from all directions. They came relentlessly, day and night, approaching the blockades with ladders and thatched panels, constantly assuming new positions.” Amazingly, the garrison held. “In place of battlements,” says Barleti, “there was bravery. They stood there as men among the barricades, face forward into the fray. Each one had decided (for necessity makes even the fearful courageous) to die heroically rather than to fall into the hands of the enemy and be killed by him ingloriously.”

After the first general attack failed, the Turks increased their bombardment and also sent soldiers to set fire to the redoubts by climbing the hill and throwing torches upon them. The Shkodrans resisted this tactic by lining up gunmen and shooting the fire throwers. So new were guns to the history of warfare that Barleti pauses, again, to describe them for posterity: “It has a long, narrow barrel and is loaded with a kind of ball made from lead containing powder and other explosive substances. It can be lit by one person alone. The shot discharges from the barrel, flying and spinning—and killing.”

The Turks, frustrated by their failed attempts to infiltrate the citadel, found comfort in a small victory on Lake Shkodra. The locals had been raiding the Turkish tents from their villages beyond the lake. To counter this, the Turks had been constructing galleys near the Buna River. Finally, they completed construction and sailed into the lake to clash with the locals and halt their guerilla raids once and for all. One of the Albanian vessels was captured along with eight men, who were promptly impaled on stakes near present-day Shiroka.

Now the Turks were firing nearly two hundred cannonballs daily. The sultan launched a second ground assault, which also failed. Barleti records that “many Turkish soldiers were killed, many others were wounded, and many turned around and retreated in shame. So the Shkodrans reaped a triumph (though it cost them much blood).” A third ground assault followed, “a gruesome clash” at the main gate of the city that was punctuated by abundant arrows and lighting-like artillery blasts. Barleti summarizes his tally of enemy fire to date by claiming that, by July 21, the cannons had fired “a full 2,539 times, not including the 110 shots of the mortars and the 10 flaming cannonballs.” Despite this barrage and the three successive ground attacks, the Shkodran garrison still held.

Incredulous, the sultan convened his council and persuaded his commanders to launch another assault immediately. He stirred up their spirit of revenge by recounting “the hundreds and thousands” killed four years previously. Of course, Barleti was not present at the council meeting and has obviously invented the sultan’s speech based on the hearsay of his informants and his own imagination; nevertheless he attributes the following words to the sultan: “You must ... impose retribution for the previous catastrophes. Feed upon the blood of the Christians as much as you can, because this is what our canon teaches. We must engage all our energies and weapons so that not one Shkodran will be left alive.” Whether or not the sultan used such invective is disputable, but at the least, Barleti reveals the indisputable depth of animosity between the two sides.

The Turks pressed upon the base of the hill for a fresh, fourth attack. At dawn, as the Christians were praying in their churches, the Turks launched their assault. The battle began well for the Turks, who managed to climb the bulwarks and raise their ensign. The sultan began to exult in what he thought was victory, but the Shkodrans became even more intent on repulsing the attackers, and did so by means of various weapons including burnt lime, flaming reeds, wooden lances, and urns filled with heavy stones. The Ottoman generals authorized retreat but this infuriated the sultan, so he ordered them to renew their attack under menacing threats should they fail. “So numerous were the arrows,” says Barleti, “that the heavens were darkened.” Again the main gate area became the epicenter of the battle; it was the key to victory. Again the Turks wrested control of that zone and raised their banners. Again Mehmed believed he had triumphed. However, deeper within the castle, “a crowd of strong men and boys” was standing ready to reinforce the first compromised position. These men “could hardly wait and were burning with desire to storm the barbarians.” Finally the trumpet beckoned them. They stormed the enemy, drove them back, and chased them to their camps—another triumph for the besieged! The Shkodrans’ rejoicing was short-lived, however, as they began gathering and burying the corpses and scattered limbs of their fallen comrades. Four hundred of the besieged had fallen, whereas twelve thousand of the enemy had perished.

The sultan “fumed in anger for two days and two nights in his pavilion, ... seething hate and malevolence toward the Shkodrans.” He convened his council again and advocated a fifth (and eventually final) assault, arguing that the Shkodran garrison must certainly be exhausted and easy to defeat. He summoned the soldiers and rallied them for an unprecedented surge, promising spoils and rewards to his men in case of triumph. They approved his words and began preparations for another clash. The Shkodrans intercepted these plans and began making their own preparations for a renewed defense.

Five days later, on July 27, all the Ottomans began swarming the castle base yet again. Friar Bartholomew emerges here again as a prominent figure. Together with the captain of the horsemen, Nicholas Moneta, he began to crisscross the city examining the fortifications and exhorting the people to resist to the very end. Bartholomew prayed aloud to God and to the Virgin Mary, begging for divine aid and deliverance. Barleti describes the frenetic preparations of the besieged, making special mention of the women, who “by every measure kept pace with the men in zeal, alertness, and indefatigable labor to prepare everything needed to protect and preserve their fatherland. Naturally being the more delicate sex, the women deserve special honors for such actions. They climbed the fortifications alongside the men and fought bravely with the enemy; many of them were killed by the artillery.”

Just prior to the grand battle, Jacob Moneta volunteered to lead the first unit forward. His request was granted and he gathered his men and rallied them with another brilliant speech recorded by Barleti. Moneta pleads, “Men, lift up your eyes upon your families and your fatherland, which must this day be protected.... Have mercy upon your wives and the children you have reared and taught with such toil, zeal, and care! Do not relinquish them into bondage and exile, for the barbarian has no compassion or mercy at all.... Our cause is God’s. We fight for justice, for divine precepts, for faith and fatherland, for our altars and hearths, and for our children! ... Break the momentum of the weapons and warfare; crush the military means of the enemies. O women and maidens, strike them with stones—and aim well! And young men, rush out upon the Turks! For behold! They are breaking; they are retreating; they are departing!”

Barleti’s account of the fifth ground assault is so detailed and gruesome that the Italian artist Giuseppe Lorenzo Gatteri created a thrilling etching depicting the scene in 1860, entitled *I Turchi respinti da Scutari*. The clash caused heavy losses on both sides. The cannons began firing at full capacity, but with less caution, resulting in several instances of friendly fire that killed many Turks. The battle raged so fiercely that Barleti says, “Had it been possible for someone to look dispassionately upon the ruination at the great gate, he would have testified that the sight was not at all less grotesque than the many different tortures described at the bottom of hell.” The advantage teetered back and forth between the Shkodrans and the Turks, but in the end, the Shkodrans prevailed and sent the Turks to flight, “killing and hacking them all the way back to their pavilions.”

The sultan was forced to order retreat. He spewed out “unmentionable words against the great Lord, who had not fulfilled his desires and did not permit him to conquer the world as he had once allowed Alexander, king of Macedonia, and Julius Caesar. Then he added that if God wanted to continue being his rival, he should become content to rule the heavens.” Book Two concludes with the sultan being “seized by a terrible madness” and retreating to his pavilion for two whole days, accepting no visitors. Meanwhile the Christians rejoiced and observed three days of holy ceremonies in thanks to God, “singing hymns of devotion to the Savior of humanity.”

5. Book Three: the sultan backs down

Book Three begins with the sultan calling a third council meeting in which he made known his desire to assault the citadel yet again. This time, however, a respected council member, Ahmet Bey, persuaded the sultan to alter his strategy, noting the defeated morale of their troops and the dread that had overwhelmed the camp. The better plan, argued Ahmet, was to conquer the smaller fortresses in Shkodra’s vicinity—Žabljak, Drisht, and Lezha—and then to leave a small army to keep Shkodra constricted. He urged the sultan to build mighty towers on the shores of the Buna River to block Venetian galleys situated on the Adriatic coastline from aiding the besieged city. Ahmet guaranteed the sultan that, with such a strategy, Shkodra would “fall effortlessly into [his] hands.”

The sultan agreed and wasted no time in attacking Žabljak, which capitulated immediately. The men of Drisht “were more manly and strong,” having caused problems for the sultan throughout the campaign by coming to Shkodra’s aid by raiding the Turks and their supplies. Precisely at a time when a majority of the Drishtan warriors (approximately eight hundred) were away from their fortress on such a raid, the sultan besieged Drisht, cutting off the warriors’ path of return to defend their city. For sixteen days the Turks pounded Drisht’s walls and on September 1, with little resistance, they entered the city, took three hundred prisoners, and executed them all in sight of the Shkodrans. Finally, the Turks marched on Lezha, which had already been abandoned.

The sultan then set off for his palace in Istanbul and “cursed Shkodra up and down. He had subdued countless kings, princes and peoples with the greatest of ease, but in Shkodra he had lost all those heads; he had sustained so many strong blows; and now he was departing with disgrace and shame.” Barleti suggests that the sultan regarded his defeat as a dark premonition that either his empire or his life was about to come to an end. “Verily,” says Barleti, “in this he was not mistaken: before much time had elapsed, he set off for a campaign over in Asia and passed from this life.”

6. Conclusion

Book Three (and the entire work) concludes with a description of the Shkodrans' mixed emotions: "They had been exhilarated by the indescribable joy of triumph, [but] realized that they were surrounded just the same." Days turned into weeks and weeks into months, with no relief from the Venetians (Babinger 365). Food became so scarce that the Shkodrans resorted to eating mice and dog gut sausages.

On December 20, the Shkodrans learned that a Venetian emissary was on his way to Istanbul to negotiate peace and lift the siege: "Shkodra would be ceded to the sultan and the citizens would not be harmed in the least but would be allowed to leave freely with all their families and goods. If they desired they could live under the rule of the sultan, or they could go wherever they wished." Venice would harbor them if they chose emigration. This news brought both relief and a dilemma—abandoning their fatherland would be an excruciating decision. The Shkodrans "expressed many different opinions" about what should be done. Flor Jonima, captain of the guards and a man who enjoyed great respect among the citizens, made a strong appeal to his compatriots that they should indeed choose emigration to Venice over subjugation to the Turks. With remarkable passion and persuasion, he reminded the Shkodrans of the sultan's ire and lust for revenge. He reminded them that their fatherland was already destroyed. He described the intolerable realities of cohabitation with the enemy: "We are of different blood, we have different customs, different laws and codes, different prerogatives and institutions.... In these things we are as far removed from them as people are from wild beasts.... Can you endure your children growing up and being educated in all this muck of vices, in the midst of all these heinous customs? Do you think your children will become good and honorable people in the midst of such a heavy plague, in this great puddle of perversity? ... Who will give us justice? To whom will we go for help and support? They will be both the offenders and the judges." Then Jonima bolstered their confidence in the benevolence of the Republic of Venice (Čoralić 101). The Shkodrans unanimously approved his counsel and finally relinquished their beloved city.

Barleti closes his masterpiece by painting two final images: the "barbarians" entering the citadel with raucous celebrations and the Shkodrans embarking on ships and sailing off to Venice. The Shkodrans "had fought so bravely for so many years for the majesty of Venice and for its holy possession. They had spilled their blood for her, sacrificing their parents, children, fatherland, life, and possessions. For the glory of Venice they had defeated such a menacing enemy. Under the shadow of Venice they would enjoy contented and joyful days until they would die, and there they would conclude their glorious lives as the mighty men that they were indeed. The End."

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