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ISMAIL KADARE



ON THE LAY
OF THE KNIGHTS

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MAY 2011

SOCIALIST TRUTH IN CYPRUS

ON THE LAY OF THE KNIGHTS

ALBANIA REPORT
P. O. BOX 912
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10008

THE «8 NËNTORI» PUBLISHING HOUSE
TIRANA 1979

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In the recent years, Comrade Enver Hoxha has several times pointed out the need for more extensive and profound studies of various problems of folk art. The great Gjirokastra Folklore Festival, the proportions and power of which exceeded all expectations, once again highlighted the obligation to extend our studies of the great wealth of folklore. Much has been done, but there is still much to do. There is such a vast amount of this wealth that an even greater effort is required to cope with the task. Comrade Enver Hoxha's idea that our country is one of a great culture opens new horizons to Albanian scientific studies.

In these notes a number of matters will be dealt with in connection with the Epos of the Kreshniks, or the Lay of the Knights, one of the most widely known example of our epic poetry, but one that at the same time has given rise to the most problems and debate.

Also known as the cycle of Muji and Halili (or Mujsi and Halylli) or simply, the Cycle of the North, this is one of the most magnificent poetic complexes, not only of Albania and the Balkans, but of the whole continent. Like the French with «The Song of Roland», the Germans with «Niebelungen» and the Spaniards with «The Song of El Cid», our people are worthily represented in the mediaeval heroic epic poetry of Europe with this cycle of rhapsodies.

The Albanian Epos of the Kreshniks (warrior knights) is a series of poems set in a truly alpine background, under a cold sun, in which its miraculous characters, the genuine offspring of the Albanian highlands, move as in a tragic fever. The isolated fortified houses, where the heroes spend the days and nights between their battles, the relations between brothers, brides, sisters-in-law, wedding attendants, three *zana* (mythological beings, usually in the form of young women, with magical powers) who approach the knight's home at dusk to complain that someone had insulted them, the alarm fires that warn of approaching danger, the setting out for war against the enemy, the marches, the fierce battles in the mountains, the lonely duels, after which the battle-scared land lies idle, the girls, wives sisters carried off, the vengeance taken, the cruel punishments for infidelity, the pursuits among the mountain peaks in the magnificent winter scenery, the caravans of wedding attendants heading for hazardous weddings, the relatives paralysed and turned into stone by the *zana* because of the sins they have committed on the way, horses drunk on wine, knights treacherously blinded, on horses likewise blinded, wandering desolate through the mountains, cuckoos that warn of impending disaster, the sister who tries to trace the path of her wounded brother from the bloodstains, but in vain, because the rain washes them away, the secret places inhabited by mythological beings, their passions mingled with those of heroes, the springs that turn red whenever the knights' mothers wash the clothes of their sons home from their marches, the deep dungeons, death, betrayal, forsaken graves scattered all over this forlorn place. The Cursed Moun-

tains (Bjeshkët e Nëmura) where the seven sons of Muji lie, the Barren Mountains (Bjeshkët e Thata) where Halili lies, the Desolate Mountains (Bjeshkët e Shkreta) where Muji, himself has been buried, their boredom lying deep in the frozen earth, the macabre challenge to the dead to a duel by a living soul who prowls around the grave with two-hundred dogs, the groans of the dead under the ground, who cannot rise to do battle with the enemy, the majestic lamentations and spine-chilling curses of cosmic proportions, in brief, a feverish action which goes on for hundreds of days, or perhaps, hundreds of years. Such is the subject matter of this poetic cycle.

The overlay of Moslem colour from the Turkish period is nothing but a superficial film of corrosion which can easily be scraped off, and must be scraped off, so that the cycle is revealed in its true brilliance. Ancient, full of Homeric elements, which appear in a number of places in the course of the epic, it derives directly from the ancient Albanian-Balkan background, from the original native stock, an irreplaceable testimony, in which history and myth are blended as in no other folk creation.

How ancient is it? Where was it created and when? By whom was it created and has it always been in this form? Was it first in fragmental form and latter combined in a poetic unity, or on the contrary, was it formerly complete, and then fragmented to be brought together again in a new unity? Has it lost or gained anything from this?

As can be seen, these are major, serious questions, like everything in this epos. And, overall, its parts resemble the mountain ranges more than anything. Likewise it can be postulated that its creation

resembles the creation of mountain ranges. It seems the cycle was created over a very long period. Within this process disturbances, collapses, reformations have occurred, just as in the formation of the earth. The idea of De Rada about the existence, in the past, of an ancient Albanian poem, fragmented with the passage of time, the particles of which continue to serve as raw material for the creation of new poetic unities, must always be kept in mind in such cases.

However, the question of the period in which the Epos of the Kreshnik was created is inseparable from another important question. As is known, this epos exists in more or less the same form in two languages — Albanian and Serbo-Croat. It is understandable that this double existence of the epos must lead to discussion of its authorship. The pseudo-objective thesis of the parallel creation of the epos in two countries by two different peoples independently has been all along a futile attempt to solve the problem. It is common knowledge that no great artistic work can be created simultaneously in two countries and by two authors. Regardless of the cultural links between peoples, regardless of subsequent borrowings, and the reciprocal influences in this or that sphere of art or culture in general, in regard to unique artistic works of this kind it must be accepted that someone took up the *lahuta* to sing this song for the first time and someone else for the second time, much later, after having heard the song from the first singer. The second singer may have introduced changes into the song, in accord with his own spiritual structure, fate and history, and these changes may have been such that the original author liked some of them when he heard his song in another

language (it is clear that the majority of them would never be pleasing to the original author) but, nevertheless, some of them may have pleased him so much that he remembered them and introduced them into his original song. In this way, the song may have travelled from one place to another, from one people to the other, with its origin becoming more and more obscure. In such cases uncertainty over the authorship is natural and not in the least surprising. What is bad is that when he who took up the *lahuta* the second claims the authorship more loudly than the former (unfortunately this is what happens most frequently) and it is usually the latter who, in his eagerness to displace the original author, arouses his anger. Then, to settle the quarrel the third thesis, that of compromise, which divides the song in two, is usually put up, and though at first sight this might seem the wisest, in reality it is nothing but a false solution.

This classical ritual has been repeated precisely with the bilingual Epos of the Kreshniks. There are scores of studies on its origin and authorship, made by Slav, German, British, Albanian, and other scientists. The epos, which is a field of a great war between mediaeval Albanian and Slav knights, is still an arena of polemics in the pages of books and magazines today.

There are three hypotheses about its origin:

- first, that the epos is Albanian and the Slavs translated it from the Albanian language;
- second, that the epos is Slav and the Albanians translated it from the Serbo-Croat language;

third, that the epos belongs in some way to both peoples, is the outcome of reciprocal influences.

The first thesis, first put up by Albanian scholars in the 1930's and re-defended by some of our scholars today, places its origin before the 12th century, linking it with the recollections of the Albanian's wars against the Slavonic hordes in the 5th-7th centuries. This thesis has been described by the majority of Slav scholars and a number of foreign scholars as untrue, romantic, subjective and nationalistic.

The second thesis, defended by the Slav scholars, some foreign scholars and an occasional Catholic man of letters, such as Prenushi in the 1920's and the odd Albanian emigrant today (the reference is to the book «Albanian and South Slav Oral Epic Poetry» by a certain S. Skendi, who being no longer able to sell his country as he has done in the past, is now trying to put its poetic treasures up for auction) places the origin of the cycle between the 16th and 18th centuries, completely denying that it is Albanian.

The third thesis, which is defended mainly by foreigners, finds the origin of the epos, first of all, not in the great battles which it reflects, but in the internal problems of the author peoples, as for example, the weakening of the tribal order in Albania(!) etc. They place the time of its creation somewhere between the 13th to the 18th centuries.

As can be seen, the partisans of Slavonic authorship try to reduce the age of the epos as much as possible, and, on the contrary, the partisans of Albanian authorship try to prove the greatest possible age of the poems (although the younger age does not affect their case). This is quite understandable: the older the cycle is, the deeper its foundations in time,

the more the thesis of Albanian priority gains weight, for the simple reason that the Albanians are autochthonous in the Balkans and there is a critical point, the 8th century, the period of the stabilization of Slavs in the Balkans, at which the Slav claim to authorship ends automatically, while the Albanian claim to authorship is not disturbed by the problem of age.

The third thesis compromises in regard to time, too. Regrettably, as a thesis of appeasement, it has attracted even such a great admirer of our folklore, as the German Maximilian Lambertz. In his book «The Albanian Folk Epic» (1954), speaking of the age of the cycle he writes: «However, there are many signs in these short poems which indicate that these songs must have emerged earlier, that they stem from the time of the emigration of the Slavs through the lower Danube to the Balkans and still preserve memories of ancient wars of Illyrians or Albanians against the Slavs who poured in during the period 700-800. The elements of ancient fables of Illyrian-Albanian origin, the figures of the Albanian folk beliefs, which are alive, and the ancient weapons, are evidence of memories from very early times».

This admission by Lambertz contradicts his acceptance of the thesis that the epos originated both in Albania and in Yugoslavia. Writing about the first and second thesis, one of which defends Albanian authorship and the other Yugoslav authorship, Lambertz says: «Both answers are correct, but in their one-sidedness, both of them are wrong».

However, in the former quotation, in which he accepts the great antiquity of the epos, «the elements of ancient fables of Illyrian-Albanian origin, the figures of the Albanian folk beliefs, which are alive...»,

the old Albanologist accepts, in practice, the Albanian priority of the genesis of the cycle, because, as we said above, antiquity is in the Albanian favour.

It must be stated at the outset that the stand of some of our scholars today on this problem is more equivocal and far from clear. While they accept the Albanian origin of the epos, the impression is created that some of our scholars say this with conviction while others are rather hesitant about it. In short, while the latter admit that this epos originated on our soil and from our *lahuta*, they hasten to reject, indeed to describe as tendencious (!), the thesis that the epos was imbued with the recollections of the Albanian-Slav wars, and thus make a concession to the third thesis, the thesis of compromise. While indirectly accepting the creation of the epos in two parallel forms (indeed, the adherents of the third thesis note with satisfaction that, «even some of the present-day Albanian scholars show themselves to be objective, by not displaying a strong bias for the Albanian priority»), they do not clearly explain the content of the epos, do not explain what wars it refers to, what enemy, or what epoch, making the inexcusable mistake of trying to explain this epos not as the outcome of tragic events which had to do with the most fundamental problem of our people in the Middle Ages, its existence, but merely as a reflexion of internal problems, such as the weakening of the tribal order, opposition to feudal rent, problems of morality and virtue, etc.

In short, by denying the antiquity of the epos, on the one hand, and by obscuring its content, that is, the wars of Albanians with the Slavonic Krajls; on the other hand, some of our scholars, although

they defend the thesis of Albanian authorship, deny the Epos of Kreshniks its base, leave it up in the air, as simply the outcome of some mental phantasy, and thus, willy-willy, raise doubts about the authorship.

Let us return to this question. Differently from the legends of the «Given Word» and «Walling Up», in this case there are only claimants, hence the problem is simpler.

There are two main arguments that are brought up to prove the dependence of the Albanian epic cycle on the Slav version: first, some of the names of places where the events take place (Jutbina, Kotorret e reja, and one or two others) and some of the names of persons; second, the ten-syllable verse with which it has been composed.

Both these arguments are easily refuted. In regard to the former, the geographical distribution of Albanian folk songs, in general, in which, as we have seen on other occasions, it is quite usual to place the scene of the events at such distances that the Yugoslav regions referred to in the epos are just like across the wall in the neighbour's yard, completely refutes this. The more so when the epos speaks precisely about long marches and counter-marches, about terrible journeys and pursuits of legendary proportions. Apart from this, it must be remembered here that it is nothing unusual for great epics to carry their action far afield beyond the borders of the land of their origin. Thus the Iliad takes place in Asia Minor, and the main part of «The Song of Roland» in Spain. As for the Moslem names, this is linked with the Turkish influence of a later period and proves nothing, just as the presence, along with ancient mediaeval weapons such as the spear, the lance

and the mace (which Lambertz mentions and which are the original weapons of the cycle), of modern firearms, which are additions adopted later, prove nothing. In regard to the names of the main characters, Muji and Halili, likewise, account must be taken of the research and explanations of their meaning given by A. Varfi in 1973: Muji is explained with the verb «me mujtë», hence Muji comes from the word Mujsi, Mundësi, which means the Victor, while Halili, from the old Albanian name Halë plus Yli (Star), a similar structure to that of the Illyrian name Bardhyl. Although this hypothesis has not been proven, it would not be a bad thing if these names began to be used and, from now on, the cycle were called, «the Cycle of Mujsi and Halylli». The ancient Albanian name Gjergj, in «Gjergj Elez Alia», which appears in this form, half Albanian and half Turkish, in all the Balkan epic poetry, is an analogous case.

In regard to the latter argument, the ten syllable verse, which is rarely encountered in Albanian poetry apart from this cycle, and consequently is allegedly of Slav origin — this is a very naive argument. The wide variety of poetical techniques which Albanian folk poetry employs is well-known. This is one of the most perfect poetical mechanisms, suitable for the elaboration of all that endless poetic lava that has been poured out and is still welling up and pouring out today, when the majority of the volcanoes of folk poetry have cooled and become dormant. Here we must ask: when this mechanism makes such perfect use of the six, eight and twelve syllable verse, why should it come as a surprise that it also uses the ten syllable verse, the verse intermediate between the eight and twelve syllable verses? On the

contrary, it would be rather surprising if it were missing and we would seek the reasons for this. However, not only is it not missing, but it appears in a majestic epos which, from the viewpoint of the number of lines, accounts for nearly half the Albanian epic poetry. As for the fact that this verse is rarely encountered outside this cycle, this means nothing. The twelve syllable verse, also, one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful of the Albanian folk muse, is not found at all in entire zones of Albania, but this does not hinder it from being one of the foundations of Albanian poetry. Apart from this, the ten syllable verse manifested its full force in the Cycle of the Kreshniks, and, as the scholar V. Sejko says, «the ten syllable verse came as the great verses come, with a definite historical mission, to give the poems of one epoch and withdraw. Thus the Byzantine ten syllable verse of 'Chansons des Gestes', etc. was withdrawn».

Here it must be borne in mind that the ten syllable verse which was accompanied on the *lahuta* was a ceremonial verse of the Albanian. As one of our scholars says, it was not used thoughtlessly on any occasion and for everything, but was reserved especially for epic songs. As a verse which requires an audience, its existence was difficult under the Turkish rule when the Albanian language and music were proscribed, and it had retreated into the remote Highlands.

An important fact which must be mentioned in connection with the ten syllable verse is, as the Yugoslav scholars themselves admit, that this is a new verse structure for the Slavonic epic, which prior to

the 18th century mainly used the 15-16 syllable verse (the *Burgastica* verse).

It must be said that even the partisans of the Slavonic origin of the Cycle of the Kreshniks waver in their resolution when they have to explain the existence of the Albanian cycle. For example, one of them, A. Schmaus, says, «However, the basis for this astonishing fact remains very largely a mystery».

Certainly it remains a mystery if you start out from an incorrect position, and what Schmaus says in this instance is nothing but a retreat. Then the question must be asked: If you start out from another position, precisely the opposite one, from the thesis that the Slavonic cycle is a derivative of the Albanian cycle, does it remain a mystery?

The truth cannot be discovered with theses and postulates which proceed from external factors, and even less with nationalistic prejudices and passions. It must be sought with a cool head within the epos itself, in its essence, because, in the final analysis, the monument, the artistic reality, thesis and anti-thesis, is, above all, the epos itself. And however distasteful the truth may seem to one side, it must be stated. An epos like this cannot be either a means of conciliation, as the adherents of the opportunist thesis of its origin delude themselves, or a means of fanning hostile feelings, as the new chauvinists may imagine. It is too great to be sacrificed to such interests.

To discover the truth of its origin we shall start, first, from confrontation of the two variants — Albanian and Slavonic.

The Slavonic variant (here we have in mind the Bosnian variant, as the closest to ours and the main

pretender to the title of the mother variant), according to studies published by its supporters, has more or less this content divided and subdivided as follows: The songs about the sultans and viziers, about the champions of the King who fight duels to defend the royal honour, the champions of the Sultan. The songs about the faithful Vizier Cupriliq. (As Lambertz points out correctly, this is the famous Qyprilli family, hence the thesis put up by A. Varfi, that the Albanian rhapsodists have a finger in the Bosnian variant, is not without foundation). The sieges, occupations, battles, raids, and duels. The captives, prisons, and escapes from prison. The arrangement of marriages, abduction of brides, adventures on the way to collect the bride and take her to her husband's home. Miscellaneous.

As can be seen, the Bosnian-Slavonic version, which claims to be the source of the Albanian version, is pro-Turkish in essence. This pro-Turkish essence is one of the fundamental points on which it differs from the Albanian epos. In the latter there is no pro-Turkish motif. Indeed the bard of the Albanian epic zone is even silent about the leading Albanian family of the Qyprilli, since it is in the service of the Empire. The heroes of the Bosnian Slavonic epic fight with the Croatian christians and, conversely, the Croat heroes have the Bosnian heroes as their antagonists. Hence Slavs fight Slavs, in a war of a political and religious character, in which behind the protagonists stands Turkey on the one side (the Bosnians) and Austria on the other (the Croats).

There is nothing like this in the Albanian epos. Indeed on this point, our epos parts company with most of the mediaeval European epic poetry. The

motto of El Cid, «*El rey, la tierra, la Cristiandad*» (the King, the land, christianity), plays no role at all in the Albanian epos. Apart from their names (even this is not absolutely certain), its warrior knights have no connection with the Islamic religion. And they have even less connection with the Sultan and the Turkish state. It is true that the concept of «Homeland» is ill-defined, mixed up with the tribe, its fields and pastures, but this is linked both with its very ancient foundations and with the residue from later influences. However, one thing is very clear: no trace of any Turkish «Homeland», can be found in it. There is no religious motive in the wars. Both the Moslem Highlander and the Catholic Highlander have sung and preserved the identical rhapsodies. There is no equivocation on who is the enemy. Their invariable enemy is the Slavonic Krajl (king) who is sweeping down towards their borders, while in the Bosnian-Slavonic epos, the enemies of the heroes are the enemies of Turkey — the Austrians, Hungarians, etc. In short, the heroes of the Epic Cycle of the North are neither knights of the king nor knights of religion. They are eternal warriors of a certain ancient Albanian-Balkan order, the Order of Kreshniks, assembled around a Round Table, as Lambertz says, in the Highlands.

The absence of the pro-Turkish essence, the absence of religious motives in the wars, indicates, apart from other things, the greater antiquity of the Albanian epos in comparison with the Slavonic epos of the Bosnians.

However another, even more indisputable, proof of this is the pagan elements of mythology, which are much more prevalent in the Albanian epos than

in the Slavonic version. They point to the ancient Balkan-Illyrian and ancient Greek background on which the foundations of the Albanian epos were laid. Many foreign scholars, even some of those who are for the compromise solution of the problem, admit that the Albanian cycle is more archaic. According to them, such parts as the magnificent lament of Ajkuna, when she curses the moon, the mountains, the pastures etc., is connected with the ancient Greek and Illyrian deity who dies and is reformatured in the world of plants. These are not encountered, or are encountered in a very feeble form, in the Slavonic version. Still according to the foreign supporters of the thesis of compromise, in the Slavonic version, Muji has mythological attributes, but differently from the Albanian version, these are formal, lacking depth and action. In their division of the values of the cycle between two epics, they admit that Muji has been annexed by the Slavs from the Albanian epic, just as Tale Budalina (Tale the Fool) is said to have been annexed by the Albanians. But the annexation of Muji is absolutely incontestable, and this is no favour done to our epic. The figure of Muji has no coherence at all in the Slavonic epic, whether Bosnian or Croat. In them he is sometimes a leader, sometimes an associate of the leader, sometimes a feudal with important connections by marriage, sometimes poor and powerless, sometimes good and sometimes bad. It is immediately obvious that the Bosnian bard has found it difficult to deal with this strange wanderer from another world, who remained completely alien amongst the Slavs, and especially with those mysterious relations of his with the guardian spirits of the Highlands (*Orë*). Lambertz says

that behind the figure of Muji we see the ghost of Hercules. In the rhapsody «The Strength of Muji» he has to choose either strength, war, wealth, knowledge or language. Like the Greek Hercules, he chose strength.

According to Lambertz, there are many ancient themes and motifs from Illyrian and Greek mythology to be found in the Albanian epos. The shade of Circe is found in the *zana* which turned the party riding through the mountains to fetch the bride, into stone. In the sister of Ali Bajraktari, who incites her brother to kill their mother, together with her Slavonic lover, we see the motif of Electra. The motif of Medea in Rusha, the daughter of the Slavonic *krajl*, who sacrifices the twins, her brother and sister, for the sake of her love for the Albanian Halyll. Likewise, there are hints of the themes of Nausicaa, Danae, and Odysseus dressed as a beggar. The motif of the mother's breast before the enraged son, one of the most ancient Albanian motifs, which was handed on to the Greeks, is encountered in this epos. Zuku Bajraktari, who, together with his horse, is blinded by his mother and later becomes the killer of his own mother, has been described quite correctly as the Albanian Orestes. Here the guardian spirits of the Highlands (*rë*) take the place of the Eumenides, or Erinyes (*Furies*), while the motif of the abduction of the wife, the theme of the distant Helen of Troy, is one of the central motifs of the epos. Ajkuna, the wife of the chief Mujo, is abducted by his opponent and, like the Greek Helen, falls in love with her abductor. As Lambertz quite correctly says, the abduction of the bride does not exist in the Russian-Slavonic songs and is purely a Balkan characteristic.

«Ancient songs about the abduction of the bride do not exist in Russian,» says Lambertz, quoting Teodor Frings. Lambertz says that the abduction of the bride is one of the most ancient Albanian motifs. «The ritual of the Albanian wedding,» he writes, «the wedding songs, the bridegroom like a falcon, the bride like a partridge which the falcon has captured, the bride's weeping when she leaves her father's home, the seemingly hostile attitude towards the bridegroom, are the last remaining remnants of the drama of the abduction.» This is absolutely true, and moreover we would add that fragments from this scenario have continued to exist even in the conditions of modern Albanian life, for example, in the custom of changing the route of the taxi which takes the bride to her husband, etc.

All the archaic and mythological Illyrian and Greek elements mentioned above are encountered in the Serbo-Croat and Bosnian epic, too, but there they are very much feebler. It is beyond dispute that the Slavonic epic found there ancient Balkan elements ready-made on the peninsula. It must have taken them from one of the autochthonous peoples of the peninsula. If their epic of the Kreshniks resembled a Greek epic of this kind it would be said that they took it from the Greeks. But no such epic exists among the Greeks. It exists only among the Albanians, consequently, it was they who transmitted this ancient Balkan treasure to the incoming Slavs.

Another radical difference of the Albanian epos from the Slavonic, as all the foreign scholars admit, is that while collisions of tragic proportions are found in the former, they are absent from the Slavonic epos, especially from the Bosnian version, and have

been replaced with light, adventurous conflicts. The very fact that the Bosnian cycle, as an ideological expression of the Turkish-influenced gentry, was sung in the homes of the beys, as foreign scholars (who do not underrate this cycle at all) continue to point out, has given it the character of entertainment. Foreign scholars admit also that the Albanian Epos of the Kreshniks differs from the Bosnian cycle in that from start to finish it is concerned with problems. Being an epos of resistance the themes of «problems» completely predominate over those of simply an adventurous-entertainment character, and the entire cycle of poems is a series of heroic traditions and messages left to coming generations. This fact, too, proves the authenticity of the Albanian epos, because it is recognised that great works arise from the major compulsions of the time and never from the need for entertainment.

The statement of Karl Hampe, quoted by Lambert, «after the 'Song of Roland' the heroic epos is stripped of and divorced from the reality experienced and becomes only a simple memory» (according to him, from then on this heroic epos serves only as entertainment to pass the time), does not hold good in the case of the Albanian epos. The life of the Albanian has never been far removed from the poetic world he has described. The song of the *lahuta* player in his Highland fortress might be interrupted by a knocking on the door at night, which could lead the musician, together with his audience, to events or circumstances very close to those which had just been described in ancient songs. And this has occurred until recently in our Highlands. Apart from this, it must be said that the Albanian song in gene-

ral, and the epic song in particular, have been more than art. To this day the Albanian highlanders say that the song of the *lahuta* is a portent, a good omen. Apart from being an institution organizing opinion and action, propaganda, call to battle, archive and national memory, song has been a kind of true ranking of people's respect for various persons, a medal, diploma, title of nobility, a proclamation of condemnation or glory, in a word, it comprised the true record of the life and opinion of the people. No prominent person of the Albanian world passed through unmentioned in song.

Let us return to comparison of the eposes.

In their artistic structure, also, there are major differences, which in no way indicate the genetic dependence of the Albanian cycle on the Slavonic-Bosnian cycle, but indicate the opposite. Even the partisan of the Slavonic epos, Schmaus, is obliged to admit that the Bosnian rhapsodies are extremely long, to the detriment of their art, and that they have been composed according to the «inflation» theory of R. Hensler. According to him the long rhapsody is based on one much shorter which has been inflated to several times its original volume but weakened artistically. If we compare the poems of the Slavonic cycle with their Albanian counterparts, we shall see that the latter are much more condensed, as foreign scholars point out (on average one tenth the length), hence they are the nucleus of the epic, and when we speak of radiation, everyone knows that it is the nuclei which are the source of radiation and not the opposite.

Another difference which more or less explains the above-mentioned feature is the fact, pointed out

by Yugoslav scholars themselves (M. Murko), that the Bosnian epic was sung by peasants, artisans, tailors, carpenters, cordwainers, café proprietors and small shopkeepers. Frequently the art of relating the poems was handed down from father to son, hence there was a certain professionalism involved. According to M. Murko, the rhapsodies were sung in cafés, Muslim reading rooms, and homes, especially during winter nights, and during Ramadan in particular. The singers were rewarded with grain, livestock, clothing and money.

With the Albanian cycle it is entirely different. These rhapsodies have always been sung by the native highlanders of the epic zone, always within this zone, never in the cafés and streets of cities and never for payment.

The epic zone is the remote highlands, within which the song has lived as in its own climate. Outside this zone the epic has withered and died. Like the alpine plants, or more precisely, like the perpetual snow of the alpine peaks, it always remained at the same attitude and never came down to lower levels.

This shows that the highland epic song has its roots, its infancy and its old age there, and, just as it has never, of its own volition, taken a single step to descend from there, even less has it permitted alien song to climb to its territory. The supposition that the Albanian soldiers, who served in Jutbina, brought the Cycle of Kreshniks to this zone is worse than naive. Since even a simple song, indeed even a form of greeting or a custom, could not readily scale the alpine peaks to reach those heights, shut off from

any outside influence from whatever direction, how could that great cycle have done so.

From the comparison of the two cycles, nothing speaks in support of the dependence of the Albanian epic poetry on the Bosnian-Slavonic one. On the contrary, everything indicates the opposite. Here, however, it must not be forgotten that the main factor remains the comparison of the age of the two epics. The majority of the Slav scholars are of the opinion that the Bosnian epic, and consequently the Albanian epic as its offspring, emerged in the 17th to 18th centuries. One of those who negates the Albanian epic, Dragutin Micovich, states explicitly: «The events recounted in the Muslim epic of Bosnia and Hertzegovina and the Albanian Epos of the Kreshniks, pertain mainly to the 17th century».

However here the age of the Albanian cycle separates it conclusively from the Slavonic cycle, because the former goes back several centuries earlier. And, besides all we have said above, this is confirmed even more simply through the Arbëreshi of Italy. Leaving their Homeland in the 15th century, they took with them a part of the epic, which they preserved in exile as in a burial urn. Such a rhapsody as «Lule Frangu» (the Wager), of the same genre as the Cycle of the Kreshniks, shows that this cycle was already formed in the 15th century. The Arbëresh factor is insurmountable in the debate about the age of the two cycles. It proves indisputably the existence of the Albanian epic before the Turkish period, hence long before the Slavonic epic was created.

The final episode of the epos, collected in prose by R. Sokoli, which tells of the entombing of Mujsi and Halylli in the cave, immediately after the emerg-

ence of firearms, shows that the epos was considered concluded in the 15th century, the period when firearms appeared. The fact that the epilogue of the epos is found in prose is very significant.

An interesting idea is that of Professor Eprem Čabej about the comparison of elements of the epic poetry of the southern Slavs with that of the Slavonic ethnic group as a whole, to reach the conclusion that it is very possible that those elements of folklore which are not found among the Slavs in general, but only among the southern Slavs, have been taken by the latter from the autochthonous peoples of the Balkans. One of these elements is the pair of brothers, Muji and Halili, who constitute an archetype found among the ancient Greeks (the Dioscuri, sons of Zeus, the heroes Castor and Pollux) and other ancient peoples, as well as all the other elements from pagan mythology which we mentioned above.

It is known that the Slavs came to the Balkans during the 5th to 7th centuries. They came in countless multitudes to the peninsula which was one of the parts of the globe richest in art. In this ancient place lived the Illyrian and Greek population, exhausted and diminished in numbers by the protracted wars, but full of fantasy and mystery. The Balkan hinterland, especially the Illyrian-Albanian zone, was the fertile field on which that folklore which had nurtured the great literature and art of the ancient Greeks, had flourished. The large Slavonic population settled in this place rich in ancient memories. Here the unsophisticated Slavs found an electrifying poetic atmosphere — the mythological heroes were encountered at every step, in every val-

ley and on every plateau, fragments of metrical legends, brilliant flashes of anonymous genius, disturbing surprises, were tossed around heedlessly. It is understandable that not only the Slavs, but whoever moved into these parts, would gradually fall under their spell. This is how it came about that just as Rome occupied Greece, but at the same time was captivated culturally by the ancient Greeks, so the Slavs were captivated spiritually by the people of the Balkans. The only difference is that the Slavs brought their language to a part of the Balkans, a thing which Rome did not do, but this has its own explanation. The Slavs came to the Balkans, not with legions, administrations and rulers, as the Romans did, but flowed in gradually, an entire population, with their women and children. Being much more numerous than the Illyrian population, this population established its own language in many zones, especially thanks to the women and children. As V. Sejko has said in a study on the Cycle of the Kreshniks, the Romans would have done the same thing, would have eliminated the Greek language, had they settled in Greece with their wives and children and in greater numbers than the original inhabitants.

Thus, the Slavs became established in a large part of the peninsula. In Latin they were called Slavonic (slave), a name which is preserved today only in the Albanian language in the form *shka* (*skja*) in the singular and *shqe* (*skje*) plural, without any offensive implication in its Albanian origin. The ancient field of Illyrian-Balkan folklore which had fed Greek art, had no difficulty in succouring the newcomers. Of course, centuries had to pass before they developed the mechanism necessary to assim-

ilate this nutriment. The fact is that in their songs, even the earliest ones, they have no recollection of their ancient territories, the steppes of the Ural region or beyond the Caspian Sea. The most ancient subject in their epic is a religious song about the Roman emperor Diocletian, who lived from the year 284 to 313, but the Serbian scholar, Toma Meretiqi cuts short the exaltation of his colleagues by asking, «Could the Serbian songs about Diocletian before the 4th century have been created by our ancestors when they were still in the steppes of the Ural region?»

It is clear that this song was created by the Slavs many, many centuries later, on the basis of ancient poetic motifs of the autochthonous Balkan peoples who had known and done battle with the Roman ruler. Other songs were created in this way, either simply on old models or following their example, until the Slavonic folk muse, too, elaborated the artistic apparatus to be able to create its own extensive and majestic epic poetry, the value of which no one can deny.

The Serbian, Croat and Bosnian-Slavonic epic poetry takes a very honoured place in the Balkan epic, and the finest part of it reflects the national dramas, difficulties and troubles of the Slavonic peoples of the Balkans. However when it comes to explaining the similarities between a part of the Slavonic epic and the Albanian epic (the Cycle of the Kreshniks), this by no means contradicts the opinion that the initial model of this cycle was the Albanian one, since it is more ancient than the Slavonic version. This is not in the least a diminution of the

merits of the muse of the other people, and even less insulting. Just as in the instances of the two ancient legends; «The Given Word» and «Walling Up», although to an even greater degree in this case, the fact that a readiness was found in the muse of the other people to assimilate Albanian motifs shows affinity and not alienation, friendship and not hostility. Their common motifs have flowed between the Balkan peoples like the underground waters. The *gusla* player heard the Albanian motif and, since he liked it, because he found in it something with affinity to his own spiritual structure, he raised a new song responding to this structure. He was a bard himself, and as such, made his own variations in the song. The Albanian *lahuta* player heard the song of his Slav colleague and just as he may possibly have liked the variations of another Albanian *lahuta* player and introduced them into his own model, so he may have liked the variations of his Slav colleague and, just as naturally as in the former instance, included them in his own song. This occurred especially among those bards, who, living on the border between Albanian and Slav territories, mastered both languages. However the confrontation of the epic poetry of the two peoples took place especially during the military service of Albanians, together with Slavs, in the Turkish fortresses. One of these was Jutbina. Jutbina was more than a fortress. It was one of the main armed bases of the Ottoman Empire against Europe. It was a garrison-town, a border fortress, to which reckless volunteers, impelled by patriotic or religious extasy, by ambitions for a career or plunder, or the thirst for adventure, went to

do their military service. Jutbina was a kind of military camp where the warlike Ottoman spirit opposed to Europe was kept alive and hardened, a kind of Cossack Seche, but with the opposite aim. It is understandable that in this multinational militarist hive, the majority was made up of Balkan soldiers or adventurers. And there, in the intermissions between incursions, far from civilian and family life, amidst the military boredom of Jutbina, was the best environment for the confrontation of the epic songs of the Albanian *lahuta* and the Slavonic *gusla*. This was a stage for an endless contest that went on for scores and scores of years. This is the explanation for the reciprocal influences and various superficial overlays in the Cycle of the Kreshniks. One has covered the other, like the Alpine snows. We must also add to these the influences of the European heroic song, the French, German, Spanish, and even Scandinavian epic, which also emitted their waves over the whole continent, contributed to and took from the Balkan epic by ways and means that may seem mysterious, but are really not so at all. In Jutbina, in that harsh camp environment, apart from other things, together with foreign place names, a considerable dose of horrors, of which there are not a few in this cycle, were added to the Albanian rhapsodies. However, these subsequent, reciprocal changes do not affect the essence of the problem of where, and by whom, this epos was first originated.

As early as the 1930's, in his study, «On the Genesis of Albanian Literature», Professor Çabej formulated his opinion clearly, saying that the Slavs took the material for their songs from the Albanians

(the reference is to the Epos of the North) and returned something from it later in somewhat Slavonic form.

This is completely understandable if we bear in mind the fact that a part of the Balkan epic poetry, and especially the Albanian epic, being a living organism, like everything that is used and not just a museum-piece, moves and changes continuously, parts of it die and others are renewed, and frequently the new replaces the old, just as in the generations of man. If this internal movement, this poetical metabolism is not understood, no accurate explanations can be made about this epic. In the polemic (which has frequently degenerated to squabbles) over the authorship of the Epos of the Kreshniks, this phenomenon has often been overlooked, and thus the research has been degraded to dry calculations. So began the endless history of what one has taken from the other, which is more and which less important, etc., etc., in order to discover, in the end, to whom the cycle belongs. To one it seems that the common place-names are the most important to prove authorship while others give this no importance, one proposes tables of comparisons, atlases and maps, and another does not bother with such things; to one it seems that the key word is the word Kreshnik, itself, which some believe comes from the Slavonic *krajishnik* (border guard) and some from the Albanian *kreshtar* (long haired), while some explain it from the word *kryq* (crusader), some count the important Serbo-Croat words which are found in the Albanian version, like *probatin* (brother by oath sealed with exchange of blood), notable personages of the rhapsodies, but some think that the verb *iskan-*

diti (to sing), which was taken by the Serbo-Croats from Albanian, as Lambertz reveals, is even more fundamental than the word *probatin*, because it has to do directly with the act of creation, and so on.

These are all useful probings when the essence of the question is not forgotten, but otherwise they turn into mere formalism and lead you up a blind alley.

Let us try to reconstruct the truth.

When was the Albanian Epos of the Kreshniks composed?

There are two hypotheses: one takes it back to the 12th century, before the Turkish period, the other sets it later, in the Turkish period. Paraphrasing Lambertz we could say: both of them are and are not true. Neither is true on its own, the two together, yes. Moreover, we shall see there was a third, even more ancient period, before the 12th century. In short, the process of the creation of the cycle was extremely protracted: from the first millennium of this era, then about the 12th century, and later, in the Turkish period. Changes have taken place within it, important destructions and reformations, as occur in the earth following major earthquakes. The major disturbances of the times have brought about the changes in the cycle.

However, while accepting three periods in the formation of the cycle, we have to say that it assumed more or less its present form, which, regrettably, could not possibly be the best, in the time of the Turkish occupation. Professor Çabej says that in this cycle «we see the dissolution and break up of the late mediaeval culture in rather more primitive conditions». This opinion is in accord with the idea De

Rada held about an ancient Albanian poem, from the remnants of which new poetic unities continued to be created, just as the heavenly bodies are created from cosmic dust.

And now comes the other question: of what does this cycle tell? Or, more precisely: what gave birth to this epos? What great trouble? Because only in this way is a great epos born.

As has been stated earlier, some of our present scholars of folklore have answered this question wrongly. One of them has written about the cycle that it «has frequently been seen as a border phenomenon, born in the conditions of religious and national conflicts. Is this an essential feature that has distinguished this tradition from the time of its origin?» This scholar is opposed to such an interpretation because he sees in this epos, not these struggles, but «aspects of a powerful struggle of the masses against figures representing the mediaeval feudal state». In a word, according to this scholar, the Epos of the Kreshniks ought to be called the Epos of the Anti-kreshniks, because it is known that the kreshniks, Mujsi and Halylli, etc., were precisely mediaeval Albanian leaders, the forerunners of leaders who did battle later with the Turkish sultans.

It can be expected that such a scholar, who regards the Epos of the North, this epos covered in blood from head to foot in defence of the borders, as something which stands outside the national drama, will end up proposing the creation of a «co-ordinating forum, such as the commission to study folk song in the Balkans would be», as though we are talking here of the utilization of waters in the border zones. From such an utterly wrong stand flows the unpleasant

fact that some of our scholars today have weakened the struggle in defence of the Albanian authorship of the Epos of the Kreshniks, at a time when the other side is blowing all its bugles to prove the opposite. We shall demand the share of this majestic epos that belongs to us, not apologetically, not as beggars from some inter-Balkan commission, but we shall demand the foundations of it, at the tops of our voices, and this we shall do, neither for great Albanian chauvinism, nor for national conceit, which is senseless, but because this is the truth.

The fundamental error of certain scholars is precisely that they study the cycle in its present form and not in the dialectic of its development. The cleaning off of the epos, its restoration, the removal of the film of corrosion or alien overlay, is an essential operation in order to gain a relatively complete view of this colossal monument. It is unfortunate that, for well-known reasons, it was not collected in the time of its youth and its full flowering, as the Greeks did with the Homeric poems or the Germans did with «Nibelungen», but in the period when it was pale and cold. But this (which, after all, is the fate of many world monuments) is not something that cannot be corrected.

It is true that in its present state the idea of the Homeland in the Epos of the North is not clearly defined, but it must not be forgotten that the successive «touchings up» of the Turkish period have had their effect. Behind the savage wars which are said to be over a woman or a pasture, we must find their true causes and proportions. After all, it has been said of many wars that they were waged over a woman or a pasture, from ancient Troy — over a

woman, to the attack by Germany on Poland in 1939 — over a hill. Indeed the Italian-Greek war of 1940 was said to be over not a whole pasture, but just one shepherd. But we know very well where the true reason lies. However, when we know how matters stood in the quarrel with Troy, is it permissible that we do not know what is hidden behind the women and pastures of our own epos, which is right under our noses?

Let us return to the genesis of the epos. It tells of wars against the Slavs. It is known that these wars were waged at two periods: the first during the period of the Slav migration in the 5th-7th centuries, the second in the 14th century, at the time of Stefan Dushan's invasions. Between these two, the Bulgarian onslaught occurred. The hypothesis that the recollections of those periods were the raw material for these rhapsodies is not in the least incredible and neither is it nationalistic and romantic subjectivism. History provides us with no other wars. Those of the 19th and 20th centuries do not fall within the period in which the cycle was formed.

The influx of Slavonic hordes to the Balkans shook the Illyrian tribes. Their assimilation by the Slavs was not painless. But this influx encountered the fiercest resistance on the borders of the Albanian territories, proof of which is the fact that it stopped precisely there. However, it is known that when such an influx is forcibly halted, this leads to battles and bloodshed. Irrespective of the thick mediaeval fog which has covered what occurred at that time, the drama can be imagined. The recollections of it, handed down by word of mouth, generation after generation, were the nucleus for the great epos of the fu-

ture. The second Serbian onslaught of Stefan Dushan, this time of a different kind, not in the form of the migration of tribes but in the form of state aggression, many centuries later, revived the original nucleus, giving it the form of a cycle of rhapsodies, of course still far removed from its final form.

It is precisely those two clashes, the events extending over a very long time, with the two periods mixed up in the recollection of the people, that provided the basic material for the Northern Epos. The fact that it speaks expressly of waves of migration proves that it is not concerned with a single episode, as in the Illiad, or a closely linked series of battles and deeds as in the «Song of Roland». In the Epos of the Kreshniks we have a state of war, a climate of war, a continuous state of alarm and tension, rather than battles. The action of the war is extremely protracted, slow-moving and permanent. Between clashes there are long pauses, withdrawals of the opponents to their own territories, marriages and linking of families, abductions of wives and imprisonments which continue for years. Hence it is precisely the ancient chronicle of a wave of migration.

In the pre-Turkish period, like the other ballads which were sung or danced in all parts of Albania, the Cycle must have been in simpler form, but more beautiful artistically. But tragic times came. Albania was attacked and occupied by the Turks, some Albanians fled overseas, while others abandoned their homes and property and took to the highlands. Embittered and sad, following this national calamity, they lived in their mountain retreat. Together with their few possessions, they had taken with them their spiritual wealth, but just as everything about them,

their homes, economy and way of live had changed, their art also began to change, especially their epic songs. They lost some of their original bright and joyful spirit. The meadows and village greens where their ballads were sung and danced in the past were replaced by gloomy, cold, fortified houses in the mountains. The famous choirs were replaced by the lone voice of the *lahuta* player. Automatically, the poetic muse became harsh and bitter.

It was natural that in this period of gloom and decline, the Albanians called on the memories of triumphant battles and deeds of the past in order to keep the spirit of resistance alive. They had taken the Epos of the Kreshniks with them and it was more necessary to them than all their other songs in this difficult period. In this way it was invoked for the third time on the string of the *lahuta*, was revived in sterner tones, re-awakened in the memory, mixed with the great longing for the time when the country did not know the nightmare of occupation. The more legendary character of the rhapsodies, the fusion in them of myths with history, the geographical monstrosities (inaccuracies in places), in brief all that fog which enshrouds them, was increased, among other things, by the many centuries which separated the events from the time of the reformation of the cycle.

However, in regard to its artistic values, one senses immediately that they have diminished. The displacement to the remote highlands automatically brought a certain unclarity to the idea of the homeland and its full proportions. But the alteration in its artistic structure brought the main damage, an alteration caused by the difficult historical conditions mentioned above. The elimination of the element of

dance, which was associated with the early Albanian and European ballads, and especially the replacement of choirs by the voice of the lone singer, weakened the collective artistic control over the epic song. The collective artistic control was one of the basic factors in keeping the folk ballad at a high level. The level was protected spontaneously by the dance element and the choral song element, from the very fact that both the associated dance and the choral songs were performed by a large number of people. The associated dance and choral songs were an artistic forum, an important mechanism to protect artistic values against degradation. Their disappearance in the Turkish period left the way open to the subjectivism of the singer of the epos, who performed alone before a passive audience. This is the basis for the artistic weakening of rhapsodies, the increase in the length of the narrative, the introduction of subjective tastes in the poems. The trouble was that the solo performance of rhapsodies meant that it became normal for them to be altered from one *lahuta* player to the other, and even from one performance to another by the same singer. This alteration of the rhapsody by the singer (we stress here that the singer was not the author but the performer), has nothing in common with that quality of regeneration which our epic has possessed through the centuries. This is, first of all, an individualist alteration, and the fact that the rhapsody was sung in different variants, on the same day and in the same region, proves this very clearly. Hence the essence of the rhapsody was obscured, contradictory statements emerged in it, and its artistic unity was disturbed. The phenomenon of the «inflation», which we saw had occurred in the Bosni-

an epic in relation to the Albanian epic, had occurred early within our epic. The rhapsodies of the Turkish period were «inflated» in relation to the earlier rhapsodies. Thus the Bosnian rhapsodies, which were created according to the process of «inflation» on the basis of the already «inflated» Albanian rhapsodies, were doubly «inflated» in comparison with the ancient Albanian rhapsodies. Clear proof of this is the fact that in its present form, the Bosnian Epos of the Kreshniks runs to hundreds of thousands of lines, at a time when our epos has tens of thousands, and its normal size ought to be only a few thousand lines.

In connection with the seeking after heroic memories, the question arises: why the heroic memories of Skanderbeg's wars, which were very recent, were not involved, but instead, it delved so far back into the depth as the Middle Ages?

There are two reasons for this:

First, in mediaeval art, especially in folk epic poetry, the idea of contemporary subjects was almost unknown. Usually the subjects were taken from the most ancient times.

The second reason is of another nature. Seen by the later generations of Albanians, especially from the distance of the 19th and 20th centuries, as a great example for mobilization in later wars, Skanderbeg's action is that of a victor. However, for those who lived immediately after him, this was not entirely so. It was truly a period of unrivalled glory, but its ending was grievous. Albania was occupied. For the first generations of Albanians who lived at the start of the long night of the occupation, it was difficult to conceive the true proportions of Skanderbeg's epic struggle. Their grief hindered this. The unfortunate

Skanderbeg, the hero was called in the old Arbëresh songs, because to them the fate of Skanderbeg was inseparable from the fate of Albania. Thus it was natural that the Albanians of the first period of the occupation would search their memories for happier recollections, and, if possible, before the time of the Turks, which, to them was disastrous. The earlier war with the Slavs was considered glorious, because at least it had ended with the cessation of the onslaught. And thus they revived the epos, hundreds of years old.

In connection with this there is a final question. Since it was a living organism which was reformed and came to life again, why, in the course of centuries, did our epic not adopt the Epos of the Kreshniks to oppose the Turks, but left it as it was, with the krajls of the borders as the antagonists?

The answer to this must be sought in our people's long experience with enemies on the borders. During their history, the Albanians have frequently had to fight with two, and sometimes with three different opponents. This is what happened during the Roman occupation, when, amidst the misfortunes brought by the Romans, the Slav threat was increased, or later, during the Byzantine occupation, when the Norman threat was added to the misfortunes the Byzantines brought. The same thing continued under the Turkisht occupation. Similar in many respects to the two former invaders, the Ottoman empire incited occupied peoples against occupied peoples, promised pieces of the territories of one to the other, concocted all sorts of divisions to make its domination of them easier. Thus, under the Ottoman empire, local wars between provinces ruled

by different pashas were quite natural, especially in the disturbed Balkan zone.

In the conditions of existence within the far-flung borders of great empires, in which the furious vigilance over some questions was combined with utter indifference over others, experience had taught the Albanians not only that they must establish a correct relationship between the general misfortune of centuries of imperial occupation and the additional misfortune of the enemy on the border, which was violence upon violence, enslavement upon enslavement; (and therefore even more painful), but that they must choose the main field of battle correctly, at the proper moments. This is what occurred at the time of the Albanian League of Prizren, when they took the defence of the borders of the country into their own hands, although Albania was considered a Turkish province. In the heroic times of the League, the ancient Epos of the Kreshniks, which had sung about similar ancient wars, had a more contemporary ring than ever before.

Half a century earlier the men of our Renaissance had foreseen the drama of the partitioning of Albania and they rose and sounded the alarm to prevent the catastrophe. But whereas they foresaw it half a century earlier, in the Epos of the Kreshniks the people had had a premonition of it ten centuries earlier. That woeful song of the *lahuta*, that long tale of affliction, was nothing but a presentiment, if not a prediction of the tragic year 1913, when nearly half the Albanian territories were torn from the body of the Homeland. And the territories torn away were a part precisely of those ancient battlefields of which the Northern Epos sings, on which

the struggle had begun more than a thousand years earlier. Hence the *lahuta* lamented that catastrophe, the Epos of the Kreshniks sounded the alarm about it, for ten centuries on end. However the catastrophe occurred, but if the alarm had not been sounded through the centuries, undoubtedly the injury would have been greater.

This is why the Albanian epic muse, which was more able than any to update its song, altered nothing in the essence of the Northern Epos. Meanwhile, it must not be forgotten that an entire contemporary epic was operating day and night, from end to end of Albania. Powerful, truculent, capable of immediate response to contemporary events, precise with dates, names and places (the opposite of the legendized places and universal time of the Epos), a record of countless facts and a true newspaper of the day, this new type of epic had long been involved with the stormy events and wars with the Turks. Meanwhile, the great, grave cycle of the epic poems of the North remained there, immovable, in the remote highlands, charged with its important, age-old mission.