

TOURISM INFORMATION OFFICE BERAT

Municipality of Berat



Berat - History of the city

Berat has been a site of human activity since prehistory. The earliest traces of this activity are evidenced by two stone hammers that were found next to the castle walls, belonging to the end of Copper Age and beginning of Iron Age (2600-1800 B.C). In the middle of the 4th century BC, the site was transformed from a mere settlement to a whole ancient city. The surrounding walls of the original city date back from the middle of the 4th century BC and enclose an area of 9.6 hectares (0.096 Km²). During antiquity, the city was numbered among the largest cities that existed in the Mallakstra and Myzeqe region and also had relations with other big cities such as Apollonia, Dimalia and Bylis. According to the historian Polybius in 216 BC, the city is believed to have been built by Cassander, son of Antipater, regent of Macedonia during the campaigns of Alexander



Figure 1 The two stone hammers of prehistoric period.

the Great in Persia, and he named it Antipatrea. Furthermore, during antiquity, the region of Berat, and the whole hilly region between Aps (Osum and Seman) and Arduksan (Mati) Rivers, were included inside the Illyrian political entity of the Parthins, with Partha as its center. Next, the city is mentioned during the second Illyrian-Roman war of 219-218 BC. Describing the ensuing events of 200 BC, Titus Livy, the great Roman historian, mentions the sack of the city by the Romans and the ferocity of the Roman Consul who “killed all the inhabitants over 16 years old and set the city on fire.” The city is also mentioned in the notes that Caesar kept during the war against Pompey in 48 B.C. In his attempt to go outflank Pompey’s armies that were camped along the left bank of River Genius (Shkumbin River), and join Mark Anthony’s

army, he marched along the River Osum to the region of the modern town of Ura Vajgurore. Once there, Caesar sent a part of his army to conquer the capital of the Parthins, which surrendered at once. This capital was for sure the city of Berat. The Illyrian name of Partha can even be explained by using modern Albanian, believed to be descended from ancient Illyrian.



Figure 2 Example of typical construction

It might be taken to mean “white”.

The city might have been named after the limestone blocks of the citadel. Not much is known of the Roman invasion of the city, but judging from the archaeological findings it looks like the city recovered soon after the invasion. Throughout late antiquity the importance of the city grew continually, equaling the other surrounding centers. In Hieroclitus' guidebook of 553, the city is mentioned by the name of Pulcheriopolis, thought to have been derived by the name of Pulcheria, the sister of Emperor Theodosius II 450-453. This name means “rich, splendid and strong.” During the early Medieval Age, Berat remained the only center to have had the features of a city after the fall of many other ancient Illyrian centers such as Apollonia, Bylis and Amantia. At this time, the history of the city is clouded, a common phenomenon for all the western cities of Byzantium during the dark ages though we know that it continued to remain an important ecclesiastical center. Berat was conquered by the Bulgarian Empire in 860, was regained by the Byzantines in 927, and was conquered again by the Bulgarian empire in 976 until 1018, when Emperor Basil II reestablished the final Byzantine control after defeating the Bulgarians in the vicinity of the city. The name Pulcheriopolis was not used any more, and starting from the beginning of the 11th century the city was known with the name of Belgrad (“White City”), a name given during the Bulgarian occupation. At this period of time Berat was a big ecclesiastical center. Until the 10th century, Berat's bishopric was under the dependency of Durrës Mitropoly, then after the 11th century, under Ohrid Mitropoly. In 1432, according to the Ottoman documents, the city had grown sufficiently to become a metropolitan see in its own right. After the Byzantine Empire fell to the crusaders in 1204, rule of Berat fell into the hands of the breakaway state of the Despotate of Epirus, based at Arta, now in Greece. Its location, key for the domination of wide flat and rich lands of the Myzeqe and the surrounding region, made Berat one

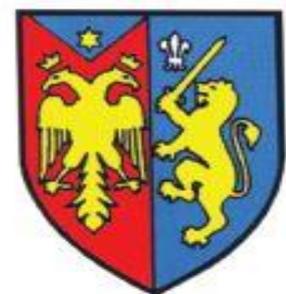


Figure 3 Emblem of Muzaka family

of the seats of government under Michael Conmenus, the first Despot, who paid special attention to the city fortification system. Michael was killed in Berat following a struggle for power in 1214. His descendants ruled the city for more than half of a century. Between 1280 and 1281 Berat excelled because of its strategic value during the confrontation between the Angevin Kings of southern Italy who aimed to conquer the Balkans and the Despots. the defeat of the Anjgevins at the battle fought in the cities hinterland in 1281, after a long siege, marks an end to their campaign in Albania. the expansion of the Serbina King Stefan Dushan from 1345 to 1346 who swept up the city of Berat along with other major centers to the south such as Costur and Ioannina. At this time, Berat was under the rule of the feudal Muzaka family, descendents of the Despots, who, immediately after the first turmoil, became lords of the city and turned it into the center of their possessions. the Muzaka family first appeared in political documents in 1274, and their origin is thought to be from Lavdar in Korça. On the other hand, which is not very reliable, John Muzaka considered the Molos tribe as the origin of his family last name, which was slowly deformed into Muzaka (Molosaku - Muzaka). This family played an important role during the Albanian Medieval Age and against the Ottoman invasion. The Ottoman invasion of Albanian territory gathered momentum following the Battle of Savra (Lushnja) on September 18th 1385 against Prince Balsha II (Lord of Shkodra in the north), who was killed on the battlefield.

In addition, the defeat of the Balkan coalition (Albanians, Serbians, Croatians, Bosnians, Romanians) at the Battle of Kosova on June 15th 1389, as well as the assassination of many local princes, opened a path for the Ottomans to invade the Balkans. The existing documents reveal that Berat was conquered twice by the Turks. It was first taken during the summer campaign of 1417 that ended with the invasion of Kanina, Vlora and Gjirokastra. Marin Barletti, John Muzaka, chroniclers and other contemporary writers imply on a second capture of the city in 1450. Against the Turks there arose a hero. George Kastrioti Scanderbeg, a Christian Prince educated as a hostage in Istanbul and one of the Sultan's commanders, who rebelled and led a 25 years cycle of resistance against Turkish rule. During this period of time the city gained considerable strategic importance. The era was dominated by the wars between the Ottomans and Scanderbeg's attempt to liberate the region of Berat. On July 26th, 1455



Figure 4 A rapresentation of Scanderberg

Scanderbeg's army suffered its greatest defeat at Berat. With part of his army lured away by the promise of the city to surrender, Scanderbeg's remaining force, composed of 5000 soldiers assisted by 500 Italians from the city of Naples who had joined the battle because of the Gaetana treaty signed between Scanderbeg and Alphonso V of Naples on March 26th , 1451; was routed. The Ottoman occupation and the establishment of the Timar feudal system after the death of Scanderbeg, were events that marked the end of the resistance. During the second half of the 16th century, the city started to revitalize itself and undergo remarkable urban development. During this time Berat was visited by the well-known Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi. At the end of the 18th century through the beginning of the 19th Century, the city became the seat of the Berat Pashalik (a Pasha was a governor of a province). the most distinguished Pasha was Ahmet Kurt Pasha who undertook much building and who was the early patron of the even more famous Ali Pasha of Tepelena. After his death, the city was attached to the Ionian Paschalik, preserving its strategic position of supervising the commercial routes that lead to the Myzeqe. Many local families played an important role during the Albanian National Renaissance, which began in the middle of the 19th century, and was finalized with the Declaration of Independence, in November 1912. the most prominent of them was the Vrioni family. Two of its members signed the Declaration of Independence. During World War I the city was occupied by AustriaHungarian troops who had advanced into the centre of the young country; while under the postwar rule of King Zog I (1928 - 1939) Berat progressed to be one of the most important cultural and economic centers of the country. During World War II Berat was occupied by the Italians, following their invasion of the country in 1939 and later by the Germans. Berat was a vitally important rallying point important for the antifascist guerilla war. It is also known for the compromise achieved between the Communists and Nationalists (1943). On October 22nd 1944, The National Liberation Antifascist Council established the first democratic government in Albania in the liberated city of Berat, later the seat of government was moved to Tirana on November 27th, 1944. Under the Communist regime, the city underwent a considerable industrial development. the "Mao Zedong" textile mill was built, along with a battery factory and other light industry. Following the fall of the regime, in the beginning of the 1990s, these industries started to decline after a prolonged period of crisis. Many workers lost their jobs and were



Figure 5 The commemorative plaque of UNESCO.

compelled to emigrate. The abandoned machinery was destroyed and some of the buildings used for manufacture were reused by the private sector. Another massive wave of emigration struck the city during the turmoil caused by the fall of the financial pyramids in 1997.

Today, the major part of the city economy relies on agrobusiness, growing fresh Mediterranean fruits and various vegetables. Currently, Berat is the administrative center of the region, and the recent inscription of Berat in the UNESCO List has made tourism one of the key resources of the city's economy.