

Venerable Ancestry



The citizens of Macedonia are predominantly Orthodox Christians. Their church is the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Although it has proclaimed its independence, or autocephaly, only in 1967, the origins of the church are much older. Institutionally, it draws its lineage from the ancient Ohrid Archbishopric that has been continuously active for over a millennium. The beginning of the Ohrid Archbishopric is associated with the reign of Samuil, who established an independent kingdom on the vast territory from the

Danube to Thessaly and from the Black to the Adriatic Sea. He proclaimed himself tsar in 997 receiving the crown from the Roman Pope. Before the sacrament he elevated the Ohrid Church to the rank of Patriarchate assigning Metropolitan Philip to be its head. The church was leaning on the legacy of St. Clement and St. Nahum, and the Slavic literary tradition established in Ohrid. The Patriarchy grew as the realm of Samuil spread. But it also followed the destiny of its founder when his kingdom was defeated by his rival the Byzantine Emperor Basil II, who overtook

and destroyed Samuil's state. Basil II who had a reputation for cruelty and impunity proved himself quite moderate in religious matters. He preserved the autonomy of the Ohrid Church while reducing its rank from Patriarchy to Archbishopric. The archbishopric rights were defined by a few *chrysbulls* (golden sealed decrees). Ohrid remained its center, and the archbishopric stretched over vast territories including Epirus, Thessaly and other not primarily Macedonian lands. The Archbishopric consisted of 17 eparchies, only a few less than at the time of Samuil.

Yet, the Archbishopric was laying claims to an even older legacy. Michael of Devol, adding to the Chronicle of Scylitsa in 1118 wrote: "it was founded on the juridical system of Emperor Justinian, for it is Justiniana Prima..." The ancient history dating back to the 6th century was a likely reason for the preservation of Ohrid Archbishopric. According to the hypothesis which still has not been proven false, Basil II did not even change the Archbishop: John the Slav kept the position in the crucial year of 1019 and retained it until his death in 1037. After his death, Leo, a high church dignitary from Constantinople Patriarchate, close friend of Patriarch Michael I and one of the most splenetic polemicists against the Roman Church

before the Schism of 1054, took the seat. Since Leo's times Ohrid and Constantinople were closely associated, and the most distinguished Byzantine minds, theosophists, writers and preachers, filled the ranks of the Archbishopric. During the next two centuries the jurisdiction of Ohrid Archbishopric spread to the largest territory. However, in the Middle Ages, the church was denied the right to be a national church for the local population. The archbishop Theophilact, another distinguished Byzantine, described it as "independent by canon but not national church since the law under which it was founded was Romanic", referring to the times before the Slavs established their independent state. Theophilact however, initiated the grecisation of the church, abandoning the Slavic tradition in liturgy and appointing only Greeks to the high priest positions. Only the low clergy remained local. The importance of Justiniana Prima for the Archbishopric of Ohrid was reiterated on many later occasions. John Comnenus of Ohrid signed the Council deed in 1157 as Archbishop of Justiniana and whole Bulgaria. Antioch Patriarch Theodor Balsamon re-evaluating the sacred ordinance ranked Justiniana Prima as the third most important church after those of Rome and Constantinople.





But churches could not exempt themselves from the destiny of the countries they were in. So Ohrid Archbishopric followed the expansion and contraction of the states that were ruling in Macedonian lands. In the three centuries before the arrival of the Ottomans, it fell under the rules of Bulgarians, Serbs, then again Byzantines. When the Pec Archbishopric was created in 1217 taking over three eparchies (Prizren, Ulpiana and Ras) from Ohrid, the Ohrid Archbishop Demetrius Homatian sent protest letters to Constantinople and even declared Pec hierarchs schismatics. Later, when the mighty Serbian ruler Dusan declared himself tsar, the Ohrid Archbishop Nikola participated in the crowning ceremony. As Samuil had elevated the Ohrid Church, Dusan elevated Pec Archbishopric to Patriarchy cutting some more eparchies from Ohrid. Although the Ohrid Church had only 11 eparchies, Dusan was generous towards it retaining all its rights, giving it new properties, building new churches, and increasing its wealth and splendor.

The Ottomans were also surprisingly

generous towards the Ohrid Archbishopric that gained the same autonomy as the Ecumenical Church after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. They meant that the Synods had the right not only to ecclesial but also to legal matters within the Christian community. It could decide on property issues, legal charges, even sentence to death for certain transgressions. The Ohrid Archbishopric even expanded, as the Ottomans were taking over Christian lands from the still independent states throughout the Balkans. The sultans were using Ohrid Archbishops for political intrigues whenever they were dissatisfied with Constantinople. Thus a gap between the once close churches and allies was created. It proved beneficial for the Ottomans in 1437 when Constantinople declared a Union with Rome, but then revoked this decision crucially due to the lack of support from Ohrid.

In the second half of the 15th century Dorotheus admitted Slavic language to official use, which was widely welcomed by the population. But only a few decades later he

seemed to fall from grace of the High Porte as a consequence of an anti-Ottoman conspiracy in Ohrid. Sultan Mehmed II banished the Archbishop and the conspirators, who were members of the clergy and noblemen, to Asia Minor. Mark Xylocaravis, a former Patriarch of Constantinople, was elected to the Archbishop's throne, and he again leaned towards the Greek Byzantine tradition. Yet, the Slavic tradition was re-established under Archbishop Prohor, who used the influence of the mighty Orizade family from Ohrid and expanded the territories of the Archbishopric as far as Moldavia and Wallachia, proclaiming himself "Archbishop of Justiniana Prima, Bulgarians, Serbs and the Coastal Regions". He united a diocese in which Greeks, Albanians and Vlachs co-existed with the Slavic speaking peoples. In the 17th century, however, religious tolerance decreased, and Islamisation set in in the eparchies of Ohrid diocese. Many churches were transformed into mosques. Even the genof of the Archbishopric, the Cathedral Church of St. Sophia shared this destiny. For the next three centuries Ohrid Archbishops looked up

to Rome and used every opportunity to plot with the western forces against the Ottomans.

At another plane, the rivalry between the three Slavic churches—Ohrid Archbishopric, Pec Patriarchy and Veliko Trnovo Exarchy continued. They used different attitudes of sultans towards different countries and dignitaries to expand their dioceses. In the 17th and 18th centuries, as the Austrian and the Russian states strengthened, the clergy from Balkan churches conspired with them against the Ottoman Empire. After one such failed conspiracy in 1767, the High Porte decided to cease the existence of both Pec Patriarchy and Ohrid Archbishopric transferring their eparchies under the rule of Constantinople Patriarchy. This move opened another set of hostilities among Orthodox Christians. The Patriarchy grecicised the liturgy and communication facing continuous revolt of the people. Ohrid Archbishopric was restored only in 1967, when Macedonia gained statehood after the Second World War, two centuries after its dissolution.

