Women’s Property Rights in Medieval Albania: Canons vs. City Statutes

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ABSTRACT

In medieval times, social relations between Albanian peoples were mainly regulated by customary law and city statutes. Albanian customary law represents an unwritten set of rules which were established ad hoc by courts of elders or assemblies. The implementation of these norms was provided by the force of tradition, social consciousness and the patriarchal authority of the people’s self-government bodies.

Rates of Albanian customary law are summarized in canons such as: the Canon of Lek Dukagjini, the Canon of Laberia, the Canon of Scanderbeg and the Canon of Lama. Women, according to these ancient rules, are considered to be of a lower social status: they do not share either the rights and privileges or the responsibilities of men. Albanian customary law at any time has coexisted with state legislation.

During the second half of the 14th century, many Albanian cities gain their autonomy from the Byzantine Empire and convert into free civic communes. Many cities draft their own statute-constitutions, which govern the cities social and economic life. Among these, the most important and the only one that has survived through the ages is the Statute of Shkodra (Statuta Scodrae), which is located at the Venetian library of the Correr Museum. This paper aims to compare the level of property rights enjoyed by women under customary law and city statutes.