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The Albanian girl and the Danish artists

Version 1.3 - 24.04.2006 [version 1.0 published 26.09.2005]. - A pdf-version for printing-purposes can be downloaded from: <http://bjoerna.net/albania/girl.pdf>. - [Vajza shqiptare dhe artistët danezë](#).



Albanian or Italian? Painted by Albert Küchler in 1831

Recently professor Ferid Hudhri has put forward some ideas about a painting of an Albanian girl now to be found in Glyptoteket, a well-reputed museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. Almira Pajenga - from the Danish Embassy in Tirana - has kindly made it possible for me to learn about the ideas which have been presented in the »Klan«-magazine and in the »Tema« as well.

In many books about Danish art and Danish literature the well-known painting has been named *the Albanian girl*; in other books *the Italian girl*. Professor Hudhri is asking whether the girl actually was of Albanian origin, or whether the explanation is otherwise; perhaps that the girl was an Italian from the Albani hills south of Rome? Professor Hudhri himself suggests she was of Albanian origin and had settled in Rome. Possibly, he adds, she visited an important Albanian family in Rome who often held friendly gatherings with the participation of artists.

Something can be said for sure, something can not be settled so easily.



Professor Ferid Hudhri, TV Teuta, 2006

In July-August this year [2005] I made a brief study about the painting and the involved persons (it can be found in Danish at: <http://bjoerna.net/albanerinden/>).

The painting was made by the Danish artist Albert K uchler, later a monk, when his fellow-countryman, the poet Christian Winther paid a visit to Rome in 1831. Who actually met the girl first; K uchler or Winther - is not known, most likely it was K uchler.

At that time many Danish artists and poets visited Rome and travelled through Italy, among those Bertel Thorvaldsen, the sculptor, and H.C. Andersen, the author of fairy-tales. Often these Danes met each other in the taverns; and from time to time they visited the vicinities of Rome. One of the most important destinations was the Nemi-area in the Albani hills. The Danish Academy in Rome has a lot of information about the Danes and this area.

As professor Hudhri puts it, the girl might have been from the Arb resh villages in the south of Italy, but I have to agree with him, when he judges it as not so likely. There are a couple of explanations. First of all the long distance, secondly that the Arb resh family-traditions would not so easily correspond with a life as a »free woman« and a lover of a Danish poet.

The relationship between the young beauty and the poet has been quite intense, and possibly the girl claimed to be pregnant when the poet went back to Denmark - only to involve himself in more intense erotic relations. At least he gave her a *vigne* at his departure - a little vineyard.

A short while later, when Winther had reached the Northern Italy, he wrote to one of his friends, the sculptor Bissen:

»I have to ask you to look up the little devil and to read a letter to her. I could have asked other fellows, but you will be the best postillion d'amour, since K uchler is not present; and I really do not like to wash my lovestruck linen in public.«

We know that Winther - at this time at least - was not very good in Italian. Possibly he wrote to the girl - through Bissen - in Danish, and *the postillion* then had to read the letter

for her in Italian. Maybe she even was an illiterate?

As far as we know today, Winther quickly lost contact to the girl. Furthermore, we have no knowledge about a renewed contact between them when Winther many years later visited Rome, this time with his wife and her daughter of an earlier marriage.

Actually, Winther had the painting in his possession for some years, but - according to some sources - he had to sell it in a period of »low water«. Another reason why he parted with it might have been jealousy of his girlfriend at that time? Some years later the painting was obtained by Glyptoteket.

I have been in touch with people with knowledge of Danish artists in Rome, and especially of Albert Kùchler. I have been through the letters from the time of Christian Winther, the major biography of Winther (by Nikolaj Boegh), some articles about the painter, the relevant paragraphs in Alberto Crielesi's *»Il pittore Fra PIETRO da COPENAGHEN al secolo ALBERT KÙCHLER. Quando la Povertà con l'Arte diventa Poesia«* (Roma 1999) - and some articles in a Danish magazine from the 19th century about Kùchler and Winther.

In no of these letters, books, articles etc. it has been suggested that the girl should have been of Albanian origin (in our understanding of the word). And the people I have been in touch with hold the same opinion as I do; among those the Danish authors, Per Nyholm and Stig Holsting.

Furthermore, Alberto Crielesi writes that the clothes of the girl are from the Albani hills.

It has to be added that it was quite common among Danish artists of the time to name people from the Albani hills as Albanians; there are a lot of evidence of that. Only specialists, at least the archaeologist and philologist Peter Oluf Broendsted, who visited Ali Pasha of Tepelena, did otherwise. In the first part of the 20th century the word »Albanian« was used more frequently as today, eg. by the philologist Holger Pedersen and the author Franz von Jessen, both people who visited the Albanian area - and the old usage was given up in 1912 or even before.

»Unfortunately« we can not prove that the beauty had Albanian origins, nevertheless the discussion has given us a very good opportunity in Denmark to raise our attention about Albania and the Albanians in the 19th century. Hopefully we will in the future find more relations from that time and from other periods to investigate thoroughly.

Bjoern Andersen holds a MA in Danish philology and sociology. He has visited Albania some times through the years, the first time in 1976. In 2003 and 2004 he was a participant in the conferences about 'the clash of civilizations' and 'religious tolerance', both in Tirana. He is the author of books in Danish about Albanian history. Recently he has published the 'Danish Law of 1683' in a digital edition - and by now he is working on a book about the Danish-Norwegian author Ludvig Holberg - who, in 1739, issued an appreciating article about Scanderbeg.

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