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■ Five Albanian Villages

Guidelines for a Sustainable Tourism
Development through the Enhancement
of the Cultural Heritage



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Antonio Lauria, Valbona Flora, Kamela Guza

Five Albanian Villages

Guidelines for a Sustainable Tourism Development through
the Enhancement of the Cultural Heritage

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Credits

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Unless otherwise stated, pictures included in the book were taken during the Analysis phase of this research project by the members of the working group (professors, research fellows and students).

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Acronym Key

CELIM, Albania	Centro Laici Italiani per le Missioni NGO, Vlorë
CESVI, Albania	Cooperazione e Sviluppo (Cooperation and Development) NGO, Përmet.
DiDA-Unifi	Department of Architecture, University of Florence.
DSPS-Unifi	Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Florence.
IOM	International Organization for Migration.
LG	Lauria, A. Agaj, E., Cala, M, Flora V., Guza K., Kapo, D., Misseri, G., Toçila, A. & Vessella, L. (2020), <i>Linee Guida per la valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale dei piccoli borghi albanesi</i> . Research report, Firenze: Department of Architecture, University of Florence.
NICH	National Institute of Cultural Heritage, Tirana.
RP	“The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.
UniZKM	Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” of Tirana.
VIS, Albania	Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo (International Volunteering for Development) NGO, Shkodër.

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- Anissa Alushi, Sezai Celolaj, Judriva Davidhi, Faire Dervishi, Kristi Kokëdhima, Anisa Lagji, Elda Meta, Tracy Qehajaj and Jessy Shehu (undergraduate students from the University of Florence), together with Kristiana Kumi, Joana Lamaj, Elisa Miho and Joni Zajmi, (undergraduate students from the Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” of Tirana), attended to the “Albania dei piccoli borghi” Thematic Workshop performing, with passion and motivation, the digital architectural survey and the related graphical outputs of the above mentioned architectural assets.

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Foreword

The assessment that we are products of the past is an invitation, rather than a rule. Knowing yourself and the history that surrounds you is of great importance to the future, and not only for Albanians.

If you travel through Albania, you begin to understand that time has passed even more than the books that have been written about it. Albanian spiritual riches are often associated with the appearance of the old and the vintage, which could be a house, bridge or religious object. Considering the importance of the universal values they carry, some of them are monuments of cultural heritage and part of UNESCO.

Today, some Albanians have left their homeland and reside in different places around the world. For various reasons, they are looking for ways to be more present in their country of origin, or to retain fragments and pieces of their cultural heritage to present to future generations. In the process, national identity and coexistence with other nations are naturally harmonized.

As human evidence of this commitment, five impressive villages in Albania are highly appreciated by the people familiar with the distance from the country of origin. This makes their keen sense of appreciation as special as it is human. The five selected villages are as different from each other as the coordinates of a homeland you await to discover with each passing day. They are separated by great distances, but in the space between them, they carry culture, identity and history.

Engaging the diaspora in their homeland is a government priority but also a human objective that links the desire to migrate with that of maintaining ties with the homeland. It is an energy which, with concrete examples like this project of five villages, demonstrates the contribution stemming from a desirable relationship with homeland. Government policies that strive for sustainable social and economic development of Albania are measurable with votes, whereas love for the homeland is less imaginable for the energy it can offer the country.

The project of five villages modestly 'translates' the invisible into an act evaluating the need for the contribution of the diaspora as a form of communication and assess-

ment of the quality of life in Albania. It is harmonized to the human aspect where the Italian culture learned in migration serves to 'illuminate' the originality of Albanian cultural values.

Albania is striving to offer its own tourist and cultural attractions. State policies would be poor if they did not include, as part of human and professional engagement, such projects which treat cultural heritage as opportunity for development.

Albania has recognized the necessity and contribution of the diaspora as an integral factor for improving economic life. This project of five villages revealed expected qualities for the substance of the Albanian-Italian relationship. It interconnects cultures and recreates the homeland from the distance of migration. Naturally, the five villages return to the 'coordinates' of a homeland where the known unknown is rediscovered.

To view the homeland through the diaspora eyes is more than just tourism. This is Love. As such, this project has surpassed itself.

Thank you!

Pandeli Majko

Albanian Government Minister of State for Diaspora

Preface

The book *Five Albanian Villages. Guidelines for sustainable tourism development through the enhancement of the cultural heritage* is the key product of the research project “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser-Known Cultural Sites in Albania”. The research took place under the International Organization for Migration (IOM) programme “Engage the Albanian Diaspora to the Social and Economic Development of Albania”, funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and implemented in partnership with the Albanian Government.

What makes this complex research unique is that it was conducted by Albanian Diaspora undergraduate students and young researchers of the School of Architecture at the University of Florence, Italy. They worked under the professional guidance of Prof. Antonio Lauria on five selected case study villages: Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë, in the Municipality of Përmet; Zvërnec, a coastal village in the Municipality of Vlorë and Razëm, a mountain village at the foothills of the Albanian Alps in the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, to analyze the opportunities that these villages have for sustainable and inclusive social territorial development processes using their tangible and intangible cultural heritage as leverage.

In the three villages of Përmet, a detailed study of three cultural sites (the Katiu Bridge and the thermal area in the Valley of the Lengarica River in Bënjë, the open space surrounding the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Kosinë and the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë) was made. An innovative approach to the architectural survey of these cultural sites, based on laser scanner and photogrammetry, was introduced in the Albanian context.

This book is both a research study from an interdisciplinary perspective and a unique social experience for the young Albanian Diaspora researchers involved in the research process who went through three different phases (analysis, modeling and pilot) in the three different areas of Albania.

The young Albanian Diaspora researchers have been able to provide a comprehensive study of the five villages highlighting their traditions, cultural heritage, current

transformation, changes from the past, as well as the opportunities to build their expectations and hopes towards the future.

I am sure that all the readers of this book will have a clear picture of how the valuable methodology utilized can be replicated and how precious the Albanian Diaspora is for its potential to contribute to the development of Albania.

This project is a clear example of how, through engagement, the transfer of knowledge and skills of Albanian Diaspora individuals can bring an added value to the development of Albania. The special bond that these persons cultivate in themselves with Albanian places, people and history, was a key element of the research and, at the same time, an opportunity for them to enhance their awareness about their roots and to reinforce their identity.

Moreover, this book value lies in its proposals for actions to local authorities, showing that Albanian cultural heritage and cultural tourism can drive a sustainable socio-economic development process that includes the environment along with the local communities, their traditions and resources.

Manoela Lussi

*Manager of the "Engage the Albanian Diaspora
to the Social and Economic Development of Albania" IOM programme*

Background

Antonio Lauria

“Five Albanian Villages. Guidelines for a sustainable tourism development through the enhancement of the cultural heritage” is one of the products of the “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

This research project was designed at the Department of Architecture, University of Florence.

It took place under the “Engage the Albanian Diaspora to the Social and Economic Development of Albania” programme, funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) of Tirana and agreed with the Albanian Government to support it in furthering the involvement of the members of Albanian Diaspora in the development of the country.

This programme is implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Albania (the UN Migration Agency) in coordination with the State Minister for the Diaspora, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finances and the Economy and other line ministries as relevant, and in close relationship with the Italian Embassy in Tirana and the AICS of Tirana.

In order to better understand the cultural background of these Guidelines, a brief description of the research project is provided as follows.

“The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” project¹ is both an experience of *research training* and an *action research*. It aims at providing food for thought and concrete pro-

¹ The research project that won the call launched by IOM (RFP No.: AL 10/18/338 on the “Design and implementation of a Fellowship Scheme for Integrated Territorial/Local Development”). It was designed and submitted by Prof. Antonio Lauria (Department of Architecture of Florence) and other professors of the University of Florence who work for *Florence Accessibility Lab*, an Interdepartmental Research Unit that deals with issues of Accessibility to the Cultural Heritage as a resource for Human Development.

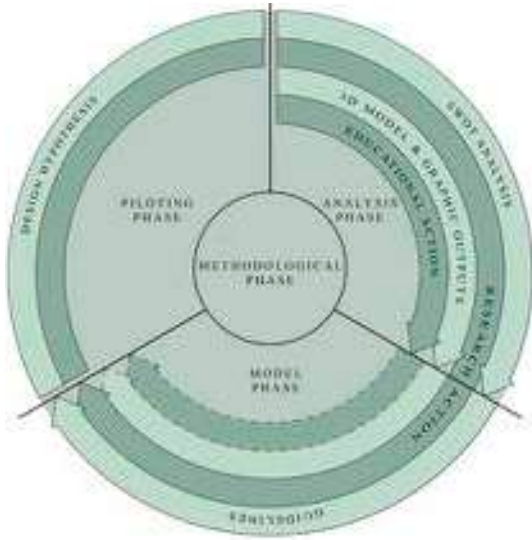


Figure 0-1 – General framework of the research project: Phases, Actions and Research findings. [Concept by Antonio Lauria; drawing by Luigi Vessella]



Figure 0-2 – Map of Albania with the location of the five case study villages. [Drawing by Samuela Hidri]

posals for generating sustainable and socially inclusive territorial development processes in five Albanian villages, using the tangible and intangible cultural heritage as leverage. These processes are oriented towards the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants and the strengthening of local identity and social networks.

This hard challenge has been addressed mainly through the transfer of knowledge and competencies in the field of the cultural heritage by members of the Albanian Diaspora in Italy (university students, young architects and researchers) to their home country. This is a key element of the research project that allowed the motivational element to be combined with the direct access to scientific literature (mostly in Albanian) and to gather valuable field data directly from the villagers, as well as to transfer this information to the non-native members of the working group.

The research lasted 18 months (from May 1st, 2019 to July 31st, 2020) and developed through 4 closely interrelated phases (Fig. 0-1).

The first phase – the *Methodological Phase* – describes the methodological design, the work plan and the operational tools of the research. At this stage, the five case study villages were identified: Bënjë, Kosinë e Leusë, in the Municipality of Përmet, Zvërnec, a coastal village in the municipality of Vlorë, and Razëm, a mountain village at the foot of the Albanian Alps in the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe² (Fig. 0-2).

In the following phase – the *Analysis Phase* – these villages were studied, through field research, from different point of views with an approach that starts from the evaluation of the general aspects to the knowledge of the specific features that distinguish them. Such features reveal different angles from which a community can be seen and certain aspects of the cultural heritage that it has developed throughout its history.

The Analysis phase nourishes both the *Model Phase* and the *Piloting Phase* of the research. In the former, the collected information is processed and organised inside the *Linee Guida per la valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale dei piccoli borghi albanesi* (Guidelines for the development of the cultural heritage of smaller Albanian

² The selected villages were proposed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Tirana. They are all targeted areas where Italian Cooperation has been working for many years. The NGOs CESVI in Përmet, VIS in Razëm and CELIM in Zvërnec, have been available for constant collaboration in support of the research group, especially regarding organisational matters of the field research in the villages.

villages) that underpin this book. In the latter, the information is used for designing hypotheses related to three architectural assets in the three mentioned villages of the Municipality of Përmet.

Two types of actions implement the goals of the research: (1) *Educational Action*, and (2) *Research Action*.

The *Educational Action* was developed as part of the Analysis Phase of the research; it consisted of a Thematic Workshop – *Albania dei piccoli borghi* (Albanian Smaller Villages) – held at the University of Florence’s School of Architecture³ and reserved for Albanian students enrolled at the University of Florence. A number

of students from the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Polytechnic University of Tirana and the Faculty of Architecture at “Our Lady of Good Counsel” Catholic University of Tirana were also invited to participate.

The Workshop aimed to encourage the exchange and sharing of ideas among students and their peers who have grown up and/or live in Albania. The above institutions have established international cooperation agreements with the University of Florence involving the Department of Architecture. In the end, 9 students from the University of Florence and 4 students from University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” enrolled in the Thematic Workshop⁴.

The Thematic Workshop was presented on March 27th, 2019 at the premises of Palazzo Vegni in Florence (Fig. 0-3). During the presentation, the Albanian anthropologist Fatos Dingo gave a lecture entitled: *Albanian Identities*.

The focus of the Thematic Workshop was the cultural heritage of Albanian villages; more specifically, the architectural survey, through laser scanner and photogrammetry, and the detailed study of three architectural assets located in three villages of Përmet: (1) the Katiu Bridge and the thermal area in the Valley of the Lengarica River in Bënjë, (2) the area surrounding the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Kosinë, and (3) the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë⁵.



Figure 0-3
The presentation of *Albania dei piccoli borghi* Thematic Workshop. A moment from the lecture of Dr. Fatos Dingo, Firenze, Palazzo Vegni, 23.3.2019.

³ The teaching staff from the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence was composed of professors and researchers belonging to different scientific sectors. They were: prof. Antonio Lauria (coordinator), prof. Pietro Matracchi, Dr. Francesco Tioli and prof. Ugo Tonietti.

⁴ The students were: Anissa Alushi, Sezai Celoaliaj, Judriva Davidhi, Faire Dervishi, Kristi Kokëdhima, Anisa Lagji, Elda Meta, Tracy Qehajaj, and Jessy Shehu (an Erasmus student from the School of Education, Architecture and Arts of the University of Siegen – Germany) from the University of Florence, and Kristiana Kumi, Joana Lamaj, Elisa Miho e Joni Zajmi from the University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” of Tirana.

⁵ These architectural assets were chosen together with the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Tirana.



Figure 0-4
 Left: The laser scanner running in the interior of the Church of Dormition of Mary in Leusë.
 Right, above: During the survey.
 Right, below: Digital survey data processing at the Multifunctional Centre in Përmet.

The Thematic Workshop included class activities (held in Florence) and field activities (held in Albania). After a first phase of training at the Department of Architecture in Florence, students and professors moved to Përmet from May 26th to June 2nd to survey the aforementioned architectural assets. The processing of digitally acquired data (point cloud) began in Përmet's Multifunctional Centre and was further developed in Florence at the School of Architecture⁶ (Fig. 0-4).

The product of the Educational Action consists of 3D models and 2D drawings (plans, sections, elevations and perspective views in dwg format) of the three aforementioned monuments located in the villages of Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë (Figs. 0-5-0-7).

The *Research Action* widens the research field and, together with the three above-mentioned villages, also covers the mountain village of Razëm and the coastal village of Zvërnec.

The Research Action develops along the Analysis Phase, the Model Phase and the Piloting Phase of the research project.

⁶ The collection of architectural survey data took place through a phase-based laser scanner Z+F IMAGER 5016 equipped with an integrated HDR camera (80 Mpixel) for the survey of colorimetric data, LED spotlights for dark spaces and an integrated positioning system. Digital reflex cameras were used for photogrammetric survey so as to ensure high quality and definition of the images. These images were processed following a SfM (Shape from Motion) technique so as to produce 3D models and bi-dimensional graphic materials (in particular, photomaps). In carrying out these activities, the students were able to count on the support of two experts from the Architectural Survey Lab of the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence: Dr. Monica Bercigli and Dr. Francesco Tioli.



5



6



7

Figure 0-5 – A 3D model of the Katiu Bridge in Bënjë.

Figure 0-6 – A 3D model of the interior of the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Kosinë.

Figure 0-7 – A 3D model of the interior of the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë.

The Analysis Phase of the Research Action was carried out in Albania, from May 1st to July 31st, 2019, by a working group consisting of 6 fellows from the Albanian Diaspora, each with specific skills⁷. The work of these fellows has been coordinated by Prof. Antonio Lauria, assisted by professors of the School of Architecture of the University of Florence⁸ and other scientific advisors.

After an exploratory survey on the five selected villages that aimed at collecting preliminary information on the places, establishing contacts with local civil and religious authorities, as well as with informal representatives of the communities, and collecting useful documentation (books, maps, photographs, regulations, etc.), the fellows undertook thorough and comprehensive field research.

This field research started with three activities carried out in parallel: the first aimed at understanding the needs of the inhabitants through semi-structured interviews; the second focused on knowledge of the features of traditional buildings through an architectural survey data sheet; the third analysed a monument representing the architectural, landscape and identity values of each village.

The semi-structured interview explored the following topics: (1) the profile of the interviewee, (2) daily life in the village, (3) places of social life, (4) traditions and rituals of the community, (5) relationship with local authorities and opinions on public services, (6) current transformations and differences from the past, (7) expectations and hopes (See Annex 1). For the five villages, 80 people were interviewed for a total of about 2,300 minutes of interviews⁹ (Fig. 0-8). Italian NGOs operating in the villages facilitated the selection of the interviewees¹⁰. This activity helped us to understand the dynamics that characterise the studied villages from the point of view of the inhabitants, and to analyse the relationship between village life and physical space at different scales (housing, settlement, region).

The architectural survey data sheet was designed according to the following fields: (1) master data and general framing, (2) typological features, (3) technological features, (4) state of conservation, (5) seismic vulnerability, (6) survey drawings (Fig. 0-9) accompanied by photos, and (7) notes (See Annex 2). A total of 38 residential buildings were analysed (on average 6 for each village)¹¹. Of these, 15 (3 for each village among those most representative of the building tradition) were reported in the analysis reports. Through this activity, a first concrete approach to local building cultures was possible.

Concerning the monuments, the values that these buildings represent for the inhabitants and surrounding communities were described and a historical-typological analysis was carried out.

⁷ They were: Ar. Enis Agaj, MSc Migena Cala, Dr. Valbona Flora, Dr. Kamela Guza, Ar. Dritan Kapo and Ar. Arget Toçila. They were granted a 9-month fellowship at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence in spring 2019.

⁸ They were: Prof. Leonardo Chiesi (for urban sociology), Prof. Pietro Matracchi (for architectural conservation), and Prof. Ugo Tonietti (for safeguard and structural safety of built heritage).

⁹ More specifically, in Bënjë 14 people were interviewed for a total of about 250 minutes of interview; in Kosinë 16 people for about 290 minutes; in Leusë 12 people for about 260 minutes; in Razëm 20 people for about 800 minutes; in Zvërnec 18 people for about 670 minutes.

¹⁰ See note 2.

¹¹ Many sketches were made, accompanied by observation notes; more than 6,000 digital pictures were taken and 12 Full HD videos were filmed. The average duration of each architectural survey was about 2 hours.



Figure 0-8
An old woman of
Leusë showing her
memories during
an interview break.



Figure 0-9
Sketches and notes
of the survey of
a building in the
village of Razëm.

Meanwhile, using an architectural survey sheet specifically designed for this research, a set of data regarding the different materials and construction elements of the monuments was collected. A careful analysis of causes of decay and failure of every construction element (retaining walls, foundations, load bearing walls, partitions, floors, roofs, and so on) was carried out below. Finally, the reports of the restoration projects made available by the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (Instituti Kombëtar i Trashëgimisë Kulturore), the former Institute of Cultural Monuments, were analysed.



Figure 0-10
Razëm. The 'red'
villa.



Figure 0-11
Zvërnec. The
Church of the
Dormition of Mary.

In addition to the already mentioned architectural assets located in the villages of the Municipality of Përmet, a historical residential complex in Razëm and the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Zvërnec have been studied (Figs. 0-10 and 0-11).

More information has been added to these data: part of it has been collected on the field; the rest through the consultation of heterogeneous documents (see section *Sources* in the Introduction).

The information that was collected during the Analysis Phase has been finalised with three reports (one for the three villages in the Municipality of Përmet and one each for Razëm and Zvërnec). Each of these reports begins with a general overview whose purpose is to offer preliminary knowledge of the village in its local context. It describes the historical, landscape, urban and social aspects of each village, the history of the settlement and its social and economic structure. This is followed by an analysis based on a series of ‘determinants’ (a total of 17) associated with specific research questions. Determinants are a flexible tool for understanding reality. They aim to explore the main aspects of life in the villages and are the backbone that supports and directs the flow of information collected through scientific literature, privileged witnesses and on-site visits (Tab. 0-1). This is followed by information gained from the semi-structured interviews and the survey sheets relating to buildings and monuments.

Table 0-1 – Determinants and Research Questions identified for the description of each village.

NO.	DETERMINANTS	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1.	History of the village	How and when did the village form? What are the most important events in its history?
2.	Demography	How many people live permanently in the village? How many people left the village in recent years? Where did they emigrate to?
3.	Information resources	Is there any available information or documentation about the village (books, cartography, pictures, projects, etc.)?
4.	Road usability and Accessibility	Is the village easy to reach from the main communication routes? What are the conditions of the roads inside the village? How accessible are the main assets, places and services?
5.	Relationships with neighbouring villages and towns	What are the relationships of the villagers with the surrounding communities? When (on what occasion) are these relationships activated?
6.	Identity and Social structure	What is the social structure of the community? Is the local identity fragmented or cohesive? Does <i>in-group bonding</i> prevail over <i>out-group bridging</i> ? What is the relationship of the locals with their past? Is there a shared vision of the future? Are there any emerging trends within the younger generations? How is social solidarity expressed among the locals? Is there any form of informal social solidarity network?
7.	Local traditions	Are there festivities and specific folk traditions in the village? Is the community capable of preserving local values and traditions? Which are the typical products and traditional dishes of the village? What types of traditional knowledge have been lost?
8.	Craftsmanship	What are the main typical products of local craftsmanship? Are there local artists and/or craftsmen (potters, carpenters, smiths, etc.)?
9.	Landscape and Soft mobility	What are the specific features and the structure of the landscape? Are there landscape assets and areas of considerable tourist interest? What are the main modifications that the landscape has undergone over time? Are there any threats and critical issues? Are there paths that can be used by hikers and itineraries that can be used by cyclists? Are these trails signposted / equipped?

NO.	DETERMINANTS	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
10.	Public space	What kind of public space is present in the village? What are the distinctive features of the public space? Which public spaces in the village are usually used by the inhabitants? How and when do inhabitants use public spaces? What is the state of conservation of the public space?
11.	Cultural heritage	What are the main cultural assets? Is there any historical information about them? What is their role in the life of the community? What is their general conservation status? What are the main features of the local building culture?
12.	Community institutions	What are the local civil and religious institutions oriented towards the public good? What are their main activities? What is the relationship of the villagers with the local and central institutions?
13.	Infrastructure endowments	Are water and electricity supply adequate? Is there a sewerage system? Is there a waste collection service? Which are the main problems related to these issues?
14.	Public services	What kind of public services (educational, health, social-care, leisure, etc.) are present in the village or in its immediate neighbourhood? Is public transport available?
15.	Tourist services and facilities	Are there services available to tourists? Is tourist accommodation available in the village or in its immediate neighborhood? What type? How many beds are available?
16.	Access to technological infrastructures and Social media use	Is Internet access available in the village? Do villagers use social networks? What is the level and quality of network coverage of the mobile operators?
17.	Ongoing and planned projects	Are there ongoing or future enhancement / redevelopment projects concerning the village? Who are these projects funded by?

The Analysis Phase ends with a SWOT analysis, which aims to outline, as much as possible, problems and potential of each village. For the specific role that it plays in the research, the SWOT analysis is not going to be considered only as a product of the Analysis Phase of the research, but also a metaphorical bridge between it and the next Model Phase (Fig. 0-12).

The Model Phase was carried out from August 1st, 2019 to January 31st, 2020 by the same fellows of the Albanian Diaspora who attended the Analysis Phase of the research, assisted by one other fellow with specific skills in the drafting of guiding tools for planning, designing and managing architectural works¹².

As mentioned above, this phase of the research aimed at drafting the “Linee Guida per la valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale dei piccoli borghi albanesi”. The overall goal was to develop a tool that, despite the fact it was focused on five case study villages, can be transferred and replicated in other Albanian villages, with the necessary changes and adaptations¹³.

The *Piloting Phase* took place from February 1st to July 31st, 2020. It was carried out by 4 fellows¹⁴ of the Albanian Diaspora in Italy and by one other fellow with expertise in the safeguard and structural safety of built heritage¹⁵.

¹² He was Dr. Luigi Vessella.

¹³ Purpose, features, and structure of the Guidelines are described in the Introduction to this book.

¹⁴ They were: Dr. Valbona Flora, Dr. Kamela Guza, Ar. Dritan Kapo and Ar. Samuela Hidri. They were granted a 6-month fellowship at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence in January 2020.

¹⁵ She was Dr. Giulia Misseri.

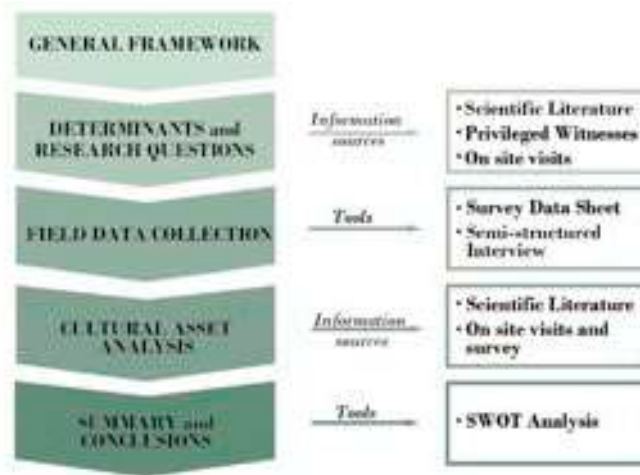


Figure 0-12
Structure, sources and tools of the Analysis Phase report. [Concept by Antonio Lauria; drawing by Samuela Hidri]

The product of this phase consists in the development of design hypotheses relating to the 3 architectural assets of the villages of Bënjë, Leusë, and Kosinë defined and analysed during the Thematic Workshop, namely: the Katiu Bridge and the thermal area on the Lengarica River in Bënjë, the area surrounding the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Kosinë and the Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë.

These design hypotheses are based on *Intervention Strategies* drafted in this book and on the following goals: (1) a willingness to promote local resources both in terms of human resources (e.g. artists, potters, carpenters, smiths, etc.) and available building materials, (2) respect for the principles of social inclusion, (3) consistency with the most up-to-date criteria on the conservation and restoration of the cultural heritage, and (4) attention to the environmental dimension of the project (i.e. the use of renewable energy and sustainable eco-friendly solutions).

As far as the area surrounding the church of Kosinë and the thermal area next to the Katiu Bridge are concerned, two projects were designed. These projects start from a regional scale framework and come to define new ways of using spaces through original architectural ideas and solutions consistent with the *genius loci*¹⁶ (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; 1985) (see Figs. I-3.18 and I-3.19; Fig. I-5.2.8).

Regarding the church of Leusë, having acknowledged its state of structural weakness, as well as the state of decay of its wall paintings, we decided to start a multi-disciplinary research process (grounded on crossed analyses and on a series of diagnostic tools) aimed at supporting future consolidation and restoration works. The information gained and the many critical issues that emerged (all of which would require a specific in-depth analysis as well as the implementation of diagnostic on-site testing with the indispensable cooperation of local institutions), would have made the drafting of a restoration project naively unrealistic. Nonetheless, the results of the analyses carried out (which indicate a pressing need for safeguard work) provide a clear picture of the methodological and diagnostic basis needed as a valid support for any future conservation projects¹⁷ (see Figs. I-5.3.12 and I-5.3.13).

¹⁶ Dritan Kapo and Samuela Hidri drafted these projects under the supervision of Antonio Lauria and with the collaboration of Valbona Flora and Kamela Guza.

¹⁷ Giulia Misseri edited this report under the supervision of Antonio Lauria, Pietro Matracchi and Ugo Tonietti and with the collaboration of Monica Bercigli, Faire Dervishi, Kamela Guza and Arget Toçila.

Introduction

Antonio Lauria

This Introduction describes the pivotal elements of the Guidelines illustrated in the following chapters. The Guidelines can be seen as a contribution of ideas that provide a broad schedule of concrete proposals, recommendations and suggestions (some of which need further verification and analysis before their implementation) for the sustainable development of the five selected villages.

The Guidelines are a part of the *Strategic Planning*.

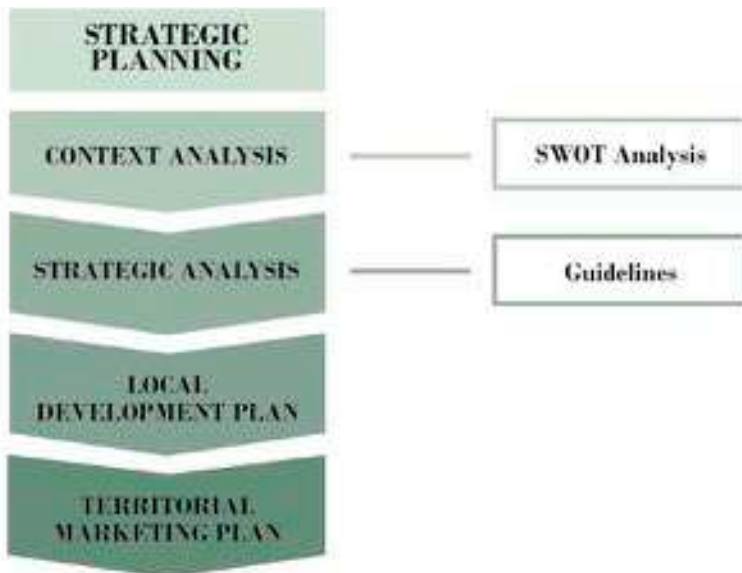


Figure 0-13
The Guidelines
as a phase of the
Strategic Planning.
[Concept by
Antonio Lauria;
drawing by
Samuela Hidri]

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Antonio Lauria, Valbona Flora, Kamela Guza, *Five Albanian Villages. Guidelines for a Sustainable Tourism Development through the Enhancement of the Cultural Heritage*, © 2020 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-175-4 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-175-4

The Strategic Planning starts from the *Context Analysis* (carried out mostly through SWOT Analysis in the “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project (see Background) and, through these Guidelines, faces the *Strategic Analysis* phase.

For each of the analysed villages, the actions proposed in the Guidelines can be examined on the basis of the resources available and used to create the *Local Development Plan*.

This, in turn, is the basis of the *Territorial Marketing Plan*, with which the Strategic planning ends (Fig. 0-13).

Context

As in all European countries, also in Albania the small villages scattered throughout the territory have always been a cohesive force of cultural identity. Although often they still preserve ancient traditions and a remarkable cultural heritage, their role was weakened over time. Due to emigration of the younger and more active inhabitants, often villages cease to be a living and productive world and slip into a state of abandonment: the forest advances and takes the place of agricultural land that is no longer cultivated; the transfer of social traditions and practices from one generation to another is in serious danger of being cut short.

In the Albanian villages, however, the general living conditions are often more difficult than anywhere else. Among factors that exacerbate the situation may be mentioned: the intense phenomenon of migration (an endemic evil in Albania), resumed with virulent intensity after the fall of the Communist regime¹, the faintness of the social, entrepreneurial and economic fabric, the low level of education of the inhabitants, the lack of adequate infrastructure and public services, the lack of organised forms of cooperation and solidarity, the submissive role of women, the lack of awareness regarding the value of the preserved cultural heritage, the difficulty for the inhabitants to play an ‘active’ role in protecting their land against external threats.

Reversing this situation, facing these issues is not easy and needs time, forward-looking policies, a vision of sustainable development and human, community, information, regulatory and financial resources. Such conditions do not seem to be available today.

In many Albanian villages – like those studied in this book – there is, however, a promising development potential related to the rich (tangible and intangible) cultural heritage upon which is possible to count in order to imagine a better future that needs to be written together with the local communities.

Consistently with the Analysis Phase of the research, this book focuses on five villages: Bënjë, Leusë, and Kosinë in the Municipality of Përmet, Razëm in the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, and Zvërnec, in the Municipality of Vlorë (see Fig. 0-2).

These five villages are situated around the country from north to south. Each of them expresses specific features, problems, potential and significance. Despite the variety of local situations, however, they also have some common features. For this reason, inevitably, some proposed actions are going to be similar or even identical in the different contexts being studied.

¹ According to World Bank figures, from 1990 to 2010, 1,438,300 people left the country, equivalent to 45.4% of the population residing in Albania (World Bank, 2011). See also King & Gëdeshi (2019).

Purposes

These Guidelines aim to provide ideas for the regeneration of the studied Albanian villages and to create socio-economic value for their communities. In a structured form, they provide strategies and actions to activate sustainable development processes focused on the touristic enhancement of the cultural heritage.

In these Guidelines, the cultural heritage is seen as a centuries-old human construction where the tangible and intangible values of a community are concentrated. As a whole, the cultural heritage is a complex matter within which the identity of a place is established and a specific urban consistency featuring historical, social and cultural elements of unique value takes shape (see ICOMOS, 2002; Fusco Girard, 2007).

The Guidelines aspire on one side to trigger *bonding processes*, which aim at strengthening the internal bonds of social cohesion, cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, etc., and on the other side, to foster *bridging processes*, which aim at creating the abilities for establishing relationships that go beyond the material and cultural boundaries of a community. This allows every village to be considered not as an isolated spatial and social entity, but, on the contrary, as an entity in a strong and constant relationship with its context.

The specific objectives of the Guidelines can be summarised as follows:

1. Preserve cultural diversity and advocate principles of social inclusion and gender equality;
2. Promote local identity and the social capital of the villages;
3. Provide insights to help contrast processes of depopulation and abandonment of villages;
4. Promote the enhancement of cultural, architectural, and environmental resources;
5. Propose replicable actions regarding the conservation and tourist enhancement of the cultural heritage of the villages in a perspective of environmental, cultural, social and economic sustainability;
6. Show that the cultural heritage is a particularly effective factor in triggering and consolidating consistent, long-lasting and sustainable processes of human development (Sen, 1987; UNDP, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011);
7. Inspire urban policies and provide guidance to implement urban and landscape planning.

Structure of the Guidelines

These Guidelines are divided into 3 Parts: the first Part concerns the 3 villages of the Municipality of Përmet (Bënjë, Leusë, and Kosinë); the second Part deals with the village of Razëm; the third Part is dedicated to the village of Zvërnec.

Each of these Parts opens with a General Overview that briefly describes the geographical and administrative context of the village, some demographic aspects, the needs and expectations of the inhabitants, the production activities, and the territorial vocations. In what follows, some chapters systematically addresses topics regarding two sectors: (1) *intangible cultural heritage* and (2) *tangible cultural heritage*.

These two connotations of the cultural heritage are inextricably linked and are the community's expression of knowledge. The intangible heritage is related to the legacy

and permanence of traditions, cultures, and experiences in a given context². The tangible heritage is seen in terms of landscape and built space (the latter intended as a set of 'full' and 'empty' units, of built structures connected by open-air public and private spaces)³.

The contents of the Guidelines are divided into 4 informative levels:

Level 1: Topic

Level 2: General description

Level 3: Intervention Strategies

Level 4: Actions.

Each *Topic* (informative level 1.) expresses a particular aspect of the cultural heritage.

As far as the intangible cultural heritage is concerned, the following topics have been developed:

- Food Heritage;
- Traditions, Social Practices and Local Craftsmanship.

As far as the tangible cultural heritage is concerned, the Guidelines are based on the relation of the Topics to the "scale of intervention" (Fitch, 1982): from the territorial scale to the settlement scale and then to the building scale. More specifically the following topics will be analysed:

- Landscape;
- Settlements and Buildings;
- Architectural Assets.

The territorial scale considers the development possibilities related to natural and man-made landscape as well as the challenges dealing with mobility and accessibility (roads, paths, signs, rest and refreshment areas, etc.).

The settlement scale explores the urban features that are to be emphasised in order to raise the quality of life in the villages and the tourism supply: public space, infrastructure and public services to be improved or implemented, specific activities or social catalysts capable of improving social life. While as far as the building scale is concerned, bearing in mind especially tourism support services, the possibilities of *functional restructuring* (new uses replacing the former ones), *functional regeneration* (optimizing existing uses) and *functional diversification* (introduction of new uses while keeping existing ones) have been assessed (Tiesdell *et al.* 1996).

Finally, specific attention is given to the five chosen architectural assets (one for each village). Each of them encloses the identity and memory of the village. The Albanian Government has recognised four out of five of these architectural assets as category I Cultural

² Albania ratified the Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) in 2006. Currently only iso-polyphonic music is enlisted in the UNESCO protected items and there is an ongoing nomination for the National Folk Festival of Gjirokastër.

³ Albania ratified the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972) in 1989. Currently, there are four Albanian sites inscribed on the list: the ancient city of Butrint, the Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastër, the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe, and the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region. On the tentative list, there are a further four other sites: the Amphitheatre of Durrës, the Royal Tombs of Selca e Poshtme, the Ancient City of Apollonia, and the Castle of Vile Bashtova.

Monuments⁴. They are, therefore, masterpieces of historical, architectural and cultural value. The goal is to emphasise the meanings they express (from an architectural point of view and from a community point of view), to underline the problems they present regarding their conservation and to develop their unexpressed potential to attract visitors and produce culture.

In all three Parts of the book, some Topics (Food Heritage, Traditions, Social Practices and Local Craftsmanship and Landscape) are analysed starting from a wider territorial context than the single village. The first Part, because of the presence of three villages in the same territorial and cultural context (Përmet), presents a different structure from the second and the third Part.

For each of the Topics there is a *General Description* (informative level 2.) where the current situation in terms of critical issues (weaknesses and threats) and perspectives (strengths, opportunities), as well as available resources (human, heritage, community, informative⁵, regulatory and financial) is briefly described in a narrative form.

Further on, proceeding Topic by Topic, the *Intervention Strategies* (informative level 3.) are identified and described.

The proposed *Intervention Strategies* are of different types:

- S.1. *Education and Training Strategies*, to create skills, (in order to revive old crafts and create new ones) directly or indirectly linked to cultural and natural tourism and to consolidate in young people the awareness of the value of the cultural heritage as a means to connect the past with their present-day life;
- S.2. *Planning Strategies*, to create urban and landscape planning tools or to suggest recommendations aimed to enhance local landscape and encourage urban and environmental redevelopment;
- S.3. *Social Cohesion Strategies*, to strengthen social networks and a sense of identity in the community, to achieve gender equality and appreciate cultural diversity, to strengthen the relationship between the community and its history and values and develop mutual respect and understanding;
- S.4. *Living Quality Strategies*, to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants and the quality of hospitality for visitors by strengthening city services and infrastructure networks;
- S.5. *Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies*, to provide documentation regarding the cultural heritage, to safeguard it from current and potential threats for the purpose of transmitting its value to future generations as a vector of knowledge and experience that have been stratified over time;

⁴ In Albania, the expression “Cultural Monument” refers to all buildings of historical and cultural value subject to State protection. It is a concept that not only has a classifying purpose of cultural heritage, but also aims at regulating potential conservation and restoration works. Depending on the historic value of the building, two categories of cultural monuments can be: (1) “category I”, whose architectural and technical features must all (both exterior and interior) be preserved, and whose changes of form can only be reversible; (2) “category II”, where protection is limited to the exterior architectural features. See Law 27/2018 “Për trashëgiminë kulturore dhe muzetë” (About cultural heritage and museums) and previous laws. See also Pompejano, 2020.

⁵ In the Analysis Phase of the research, the serious lack of information resources in terms of standards, cartography, scientific literature, etc., was, as far as possible, compensated through an accurate field analysis that allowed the researchers to understand the needs and expectations of the inhabitants of the villages and to observe *de visu* potential and critical issues. Useful information was also obtained through the interviews with authoritative Albanian scholars: Prof. Pirro Thomo, Prof. Aleksandër Meksi (former Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania) and Prof. Luljeta Bozo. For further information on this matter, please refer to the paragraph Sources.

- S.6. *Enhancement Strategies*, to define conditions for actions aimed at creating socio-economic value for communities through: the recovery and sustainable use of cultural heritage, the activation or strengthening of production chains linked to the region together with the promotion and the development of experiential tourism and eco-tourism;
- S.7. *Management Strategies*, for the maintenance over time of the (tangible and intangible) values of the cultural heritage related to social and cultural dynamics.

Each Strategy is achieved through one or more specific *Actions* (informative level 4.). With Actions, Guidelines move from a theoretical, general and abstract level (Intervention Strategies) to an operational level, through the description of concrete measures aimed at raising the well-being of the communities.

The Actions are based on the information (from field analysis, scientific literature, regulations) gathered during the research and, more particularly, on the SWOT analysis of each village (knowledge of the places regarding their components, the threats and the problems that afflict them, the specific emergencies to be solved, the particular conflicts between different needs to be addressed, the potential to enhance, etc.).

For each Intervention Strategy, the Actions are listed according to a principle of priority based on their urgency/impact.

When deemed useful, the *actors of local development* are indicated. They can be public entities (supranational bodies; State or local bodies or their territorial branches; national agencies for development cooperation, etc.) or private entities (inhabitants, associations of inhabitants, social cooperatives, community businesses, entrepreneurs, NGOs, etc.) who could play a role in the implementation of the Action, who could take advantage of it or who could be called to manage it over time⁶.

In the various contexts, the Actions express practical options related to available (or foreseeable) resources. They propose tools, suggestions, activities, intervention methods, working hypotheses whose feasibility will be suitably assessed in the economic-financial and administrative survey. The Actions, therefore, must be understood as a source of ideas, suggestions and cultural and operational stimuli to be critically filtered and developed.

Some Actions are quite simple to implement; others require demanding resources over a sustained time and strong cooperation between public institutions, development cooperation agencies, NGOs and inhabitants. The Actions are numbered from 1 to n for each of the Topics addressed.

The parts of the Actions that are not consistent with current urban planning regulations are indicated by an underline.

The different Topics, illustrated in the four information levels in sequential and analytical form, are, in fact, closely connected to each other. They are poles of a single network of relationships that tells the story of each village, its peculiarities and its perspectives. This leads to inevitable overlaps that, however, were reduced through the cross-referencing method (Fig. 0-14).

⁶ Sometimes these entities are not common in the Albanian context such as the case of “community businesses”, essentially private organisations focused on benefiting a specific local geographic area that arise on an initiative from below and act independently from the public sphere, possibly developing a collaboration with it (Mori & Sforzi, 2018). In the Albanian rural areas, it can be assumed that in the starting of community businesses an important role could be played by NGOs.

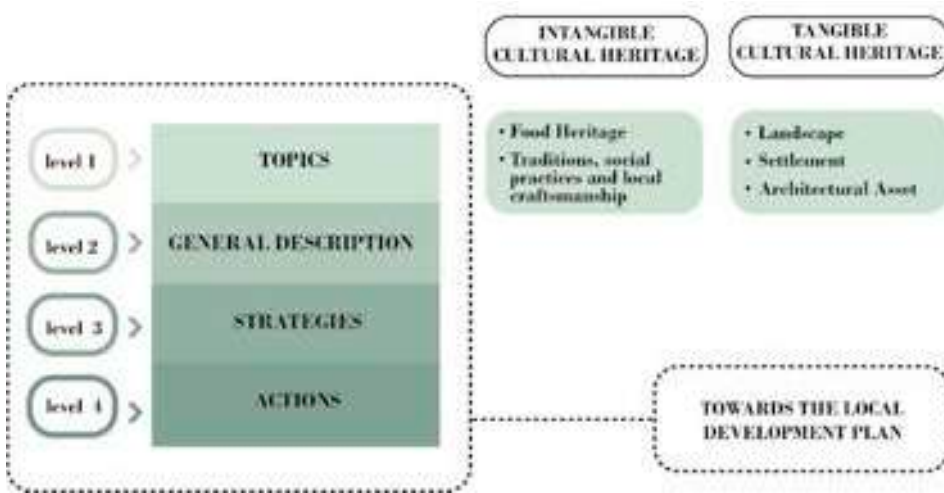


Figure 0-14
Informative levels
and topics of
the Guidelines.
[Concept by
Antonio Lauria;
drawing by
Samuela Hidri]

Target of the Guidelines

In general, the Guidelines are designed for all those who are concerned about the issues of enhancing the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Albanian villages as a driver of sustainable development.

More specifically, they constitute a methodological and knowledge base available to villagers, decision makers (central institutions, local administrations), associations, NGOs, economic operators, designers, planners and researchers.

Replicability of the Guidelines

Although focused on specific territorial areas (the five villages of Bënjë, Kosinë, Leusë, Razëm and Zvërnec), the Guidelines aim at proposing a theoretical model to guide enhancement and development processes also in different contexts from the ones analysed. The purpose is, therefore, to develop a guiding tool that can be transferred and replicated in other minor Albanian centres, following the necessary changes and adaptations. The five selected villages, therefore, can be considered as “pilot models”.

Sources⁷

The lack of information resources that emerged during the Analysis Phase (see note 5) is obviously also reflected in the drafting of the Guidelines. Scientific literature is limited. There is an almost complete lack of specific studies on the villages analysed and the few texts available are often characterised by an amateur approach.

When bibliographic sources are available, they are not always easily accessible. The National Library of Tirana – one of few Albanian libraries with a digital catalogue – offers the possibility of consulting only one text per day at its premises. The other library that the research team has been able to access is the Library of the Na-

⁷ This section was written by Kamela Guza and Valbona Flora.

tional Institute of Cultural Heritage, which, unfortunately, does not even have a paper catalogue⁸.

The National Institute of Cultural Heritage has made available the files dedicated to each of the cultural monuments studied⁹. These, in most cases, simply report extracts of what has already been published in the history of architecture textbooks or in the articles of the journal *Monumentet*.

The archival documentation related to the cultural monuments studied (limited to a repertoire of photos taken in the 1960s and 1970s) have proved very useful in understanding the changes that have taken place in recent decades. The construction history of the buildings, however, remains unexplored from an archival point of view. In most cases, it would be necessary to consult the archives of the Orthodox Church and part of the Ottoman archives (the former are not accessible; the latter are mostly in Turkey). This type of research would also require specific paleographic skills concerning the writing and understanding of Greek (at least from the 12th century) and Turkish (from the 18th century), which the members of the research group do not possess.

The reports on the restoration projects have been very helpful in reconstructing the history of the works and the structural issues of the monuments, especially regarding the parts of the buildings that are not accessible with a direct survey. Professionals who oversaw the restoration projects provided other useful information¹⁰.

Several obstacles were also encountered with cartographic documentation. First of all, historical cartography is almost completely lacking in Albania. The historical documentation available on the website of the State Authority for Geospatial Information (ASIG) is limited to what has been produced by the Italian Military Geographical Institute (between 1928 and 1944) and the Geographical and Military Infrastructure Institute of Tirana (between 1959 and 1988) and is not sufficient for a territorial interpretation stratified over time¹¹. Even in the current cartography developed during the drafting of the new PPVs – Planet e Përgjithshme Vendore (General Town Plans), there is a lack of information that makes it difficult to properly read and understand the places.

The landscape is another topic that suffers from a scarcity of written sources and cartography. The planning system in Albania does not explicitly take account of landscape. The current regulations are limited to the protection of certain assets of landscape interest. The lack of a comprehensive view of “landscape planning” and of adequate support tools (like the Landscape Plan, for example), is a difficult issue for those who approach this topic. There is also a lack of historical and thematic maps on land use for reconstructing the evolutionary process of the landscape, especially the natural and agrarian one. For the case study villages, the landscape reading was carried out through an analysis of the field data gathered and through the reading of the basic cartography provided by ASIG, cross-referenced with the data from the PPVs.

⁸ The consultation of the texts was made easier only thanks to the kindness and helpfulness of the librarian – Mrs. Mimoza Zereci – who guided and oriented our bibliographic research.

⁹ This was possible thanks to the helpfulness of Mrs. Daniel Pirushi and her work team.

¹⁰ In particular: professors Luljeta Bozo, Aleksandër Meksi and Pirro Thomo.

¹¹ Cartographic documentation has also been sought at the Technical Archive of Construction (TAC). No information was found regarding the area where the five case-study villages are situated. That is because the TAC deals mostly with data on specific buildings rather than the bigger territorial scale.

As far as the intangible cultural heritage is concerned, it has been possible to verify the presence of folklore, ethnology and material culture archives belonging to the Academy of Albanological Studies and also the presence of several significant documents conserved at the Central State Archive of Albania¹². Unfortunately, due to logistical reasons (see Research Limits section), it has been possible to carry out only a remote research through their official websites.

Historical information is also insufficient in terms of demographic development. The official data from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) are available starting from 2001. For the previous data, it is necessary to address the Administrative Units, the new items in the Albanian administrative hierarchy (since 2015) that include in a purely formal and artificial way a series of neighbouring villages. The Administrative Units do not have a Statistics Office and the only way to obtain information is to contact the Registry Offices, which are reluctant to release detailed census data. In addition to this, Administrative Units do not possess data on the population of each single village (there are only aggregated data per Administrative Unit) and it is only thanks to the personal helpfulness of the employees that it was possible to reconstruct a general (though partial) quantitative framework.

Research Limits

Apart from the lack of information sources previously illustrated, there are other limitations regarding this work that ought to be declared.

First of all, these Guidelines deal with a particularly wide range of issues that spread across multiple study fields and produce a complexity of knowledge especially challenging to address.

It should also be considered that for some of the fellows of the Albanian Diaspora in Italy, the participation in “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project was the first real research experience. In any case, they did their best to compensate their lack of experience with a high sense of motivation, commitment and enthusiasm.

The field research in the five villages lasted only three months. It was conducted with deep care and methodological rigour, but there are still some issues that would have needed further investigations and confirmation. These doubts, at least in part, might have been cleared during a research trip to Albania scheduled for spring 2020, which was not possible to carry out because of the restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

For all these reasons, despite the strenuous effort to check and supervise the contents of the book and the related sources, there is a possibility that errors and omissions may have occurred.

For any inaccuracies that may appear in this book, the authors wish to apologize to the readers.

¹² Ethnographic research in Albania can be divided in two parts from a chronological point of view: during and after Hoxha’s regime. The works published during the regime were fundamental for recognising traditions, social practices and local craftsmanship items. However, they are characterised by a general tendency to celebrate national values avoiding any critical attitude or any comparisons with other cultural contexts (such as the Balkan Peninsula, for example). This approach has started to change thanks to the studies and publications by Albanian and foreign scholars, mostly starting from the 2000s (see, *inter alia*, Tirta, 2003, 2004; Hysa, 2010; Doja, 2015; Doja & Abazi, 2016; De Rapper, 2017). The Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies (Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturorë dhe i Studimit të Artit – IAKSA) is currently making a great contribution in this field of study.

Authors, Working Group and External Collaborators

This book, authored by Antonio Lauria, Valbona Flora and Kamela Guza, is the result of a thorough process of review, update and integration of reports and related documents produced during the “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

This working group, coordinated by Antonio Lauria, consisted of professors (Leonardo Chiesi, Pietro Matracchi and Ugo Tonietti), digital architectural survey experts (Francesco Tioli and Monica Bercigli), research fellows (Enis Agaj, Migena Cala, Valbona Flora, Kamela Guza, Samuela Hidri, Dritan Kapo, Giulia Misseri, Arget Toçila and Luigi Vessella), as well as students from the University of Florence (Anissa Alushi, Sezai Celooliaj, Judriva Davidhi, Faire Dervishi, Kristi Kokëdhima, Anisa Lagji, Elda Meta, Tracy Qehajaj, and Jessy Shehu) and from the Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” of Tirana (Kristiana Kumi, Joana Lamaj, Elisa Miho e Joni Zajmi) (Fig. 0-15).

Specific issues also included the friendly cooperation of Mario Biggeri, Luljeta Bozo, Sandro Danesi, Fatos Dingo, Aleksandër Meksi, Kreshnik Merxhani, Pier Angelo Mori, Alessandro Rinaldi, Pirro Thomo, Mimoza Zereci.

Ça va sans dire, the authors are solely responsible for the contents of the book.



Figure 0-15 – Palazzo Vegni, Florence. A part of the University of Florence staff who worked on “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project. Standing from the left: Enis Agaj, Migena Cala, Luigi Vessella, Giulia Misseri, Ugo Tonietti, Antonio Lauria, Pietro Matracchi, Arget Toçila. Kneeling from the left: Dritan Kapo, Kamela Guza and Valbona Flora.

PART I

THREE VILLAGES OF PËRMET: BËNJË, KOSINË AND LEUSË



Figure I-0.1 – Përmet on the map of Albania.

General overview

VILLAGES	ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES	MUNICIPALITY	REGION
Bënjë	Petran	Përmet	Përmet	Gjirokaštër
Kosinë	Piskovë			
Leusë	Petran			

Përmet is a municipality in Gjirokaštër Region, Southern Albania (Fig. I-0.1). Its territory has a historic tradition that is deeply rooted in the distant past, as evidenced by its many architectural assets. Since the 17th century, it has caught the attention of foreign travellers who crossed the Balkans on their journey from Western Europe to Turkey.

Edith Durham, the English anthropologist to whose attentive observation Albania is so greatly indebted, when looking at Përmet from one of the hills that surround it, called the small town “one of the most beautiful places in the world” (as cited by Adhami, 2001^a). The inhabitants themselves are aware of the beauty of their land, as exemplified by the saying: “O Përmet, o xhenet, bukë pak dhe ujë det.” (“Përmet, you are a paradise, there is little bread, but as much water as in the sea.”) (Adhami, 2001^b). This phrase shows with deep clarity the role of water in the nature of the place, best represented by the Vjosa River and its tributaries, as well as by the many streams that flow down from the mountains¹ (Fig. I-0.2).

¹ The name of Përmet derives, through the dialectal “përm eti”, from “prenetjen” (quench thirst). In fact, from ancient times the streams of Përmet quenched the thirst of wayfarers who used the valley of the Vjosa River as a corridor between Greek and Albanian territory (see Pistrick, 2015).



Figure I-0.2
The Vjosa River
flowing through the
centre of Përmet.

At the same time, it refers to the lack of arable land (there is a scarce amount of land for producing “bread”), due to a landscape consisting mostly of hilly and mountainous terrains.

The Vjosa River and its tributaries are a sort of common guiding thread that traverses and ‘supports’ the territory. Like a backbone, they connect a number of cultural assets (natural or architectural) which are significant for the history of the three villages: prehistoric caves, thermal baths, mills, churches, ancient bridges and a canyon, all elements of outstanding monumental value that make the landscape of the area unique.

In addition, the area of Përmet also features several traditional culinary products of very high quality, among which dairy products, *raki* (a distilled spirit comparable to the Italian grappa) obtained from various fruits and berries (grape, apple, plum, juniper, etc.), and *gliko*, a compote made from fruit and vegetables.

The current settlements of the villages of Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë are the result of developments that took place mostly during the 19th century. There are, however, traces that are much older.

The area of Bënjë, which lies entirely within the “Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli” National Park, has undergone anthropization processes since prehistoric times. Despite its appearance being permanently altered by the events that took place during World War II, the village, with its fortified stone houses overlooking the valley of the Lengarica River, is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful in the municipality of Përmet. Due to its landscape and architectural value, it was recognised in 2016 as a “historical centre” and as such has come under the protection of the National Institute for the Cultural Heritage² (former Institute of the Cultural Monuments) (Fig. I-0.3).

² The Institute has recently changed its name, according to the Law 27/2018 “Për trashëgiminë kulturore dhe muzetë” (About cultural heritage and museums).



Figure I-0.3
A traditional house
in Bënjë.

The village of Leusë existed before 1812, the year in which the Church of the Dormition of Mary was built. Leusë also suffered great damage during World War II (Saliu, 2011). Today, the image offered to the visitor is that of a compact body of stone extending uninterruptedly from the houses to the narrow streets, the enclosure walls and the courtyards.

There is little information concerning the history of Kosinë. The inhabitants show a strong connection with the Byzantine Church of the Dormition of Mary, but regrettably, it was impossible to go back to the origins of the current settlement, or even to know if there already was a village in the 12th century when the church was built. During the past few decades the village has uninterruptedly undergone intense construction activities which have altered its original rural identity, recognisable today only in the few surviving traditional buildings.

The churches devoted to the Virgin Mary are evidence of the dominant religious culture in the villages. Nearly all the inhabitants of Leusë e Bënjë are Orthodox Christians, while in Kosinë there is an important percentage of Bektashi (members of an Islamic mystic cult)³, together with a small number of Muslims.

The main representative of the civil institutions is the *kryeplaku* (literally “the head of the elders”) who is chosen by the inhabitants every 4 years. He incarnates the inheritance of ancient traditions related to the governance of the elders and often has the role of mediator between the public administration and the village community.

³ The headquarters of the Sufi order of the Bektashi (*Kryegjyshata*) is located in Tirana. The order moved to Albania in 1929 as a result of the Law passed in 1925 by Atatürk’s government forbidding the practice of Bektashi rites in Turkey. The presence of the Bektashi in Albania is known since the 16th and 17th centuries (Saliu, 2011).

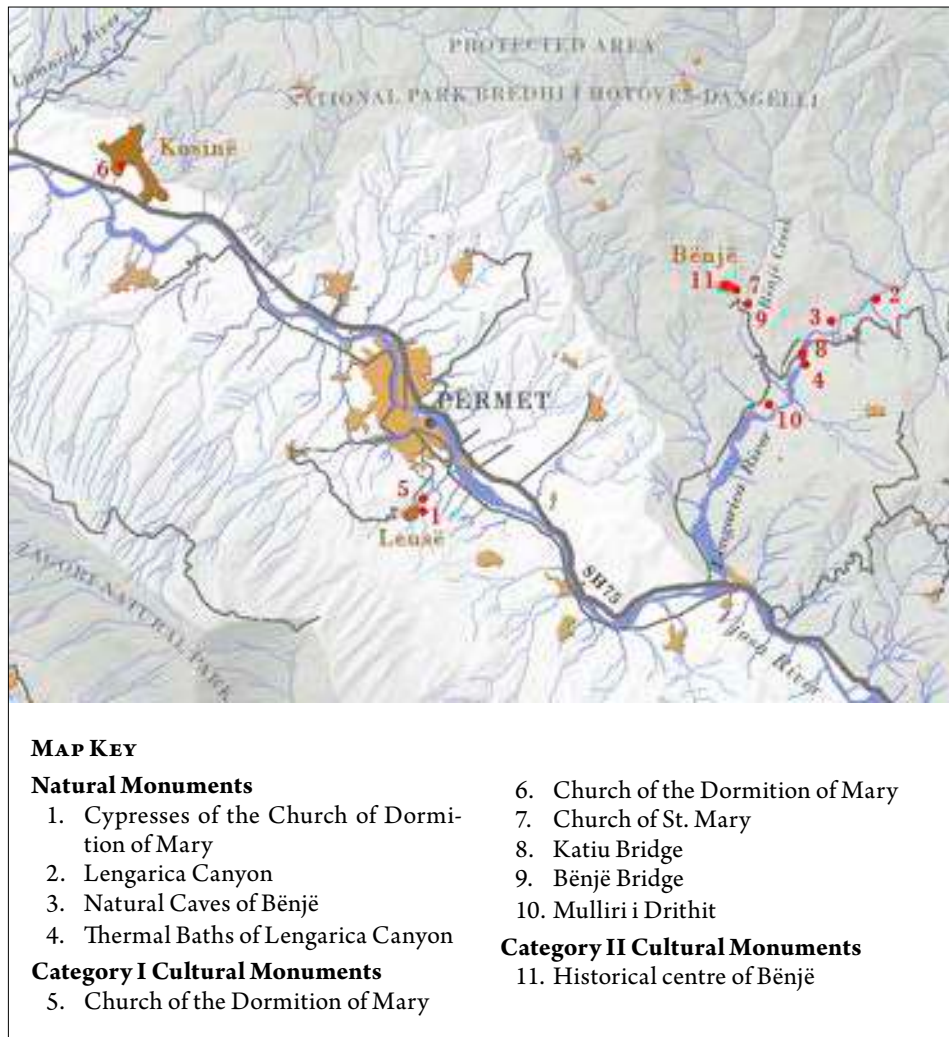


Figure I-0.4
The Natural
and Cultural
Monuments in the
villages of Bënjë,
Kosinë and Leusë.
[Author: Dritan
Kapo]

The rich cultural and natural heritage of the three villages is a resource which is yet untapped, mostly as a result of the mass emigration which occurred after the collapse of the Communist regime (Fig. I-0.4). In the case of Leusë, the number of inhabitants recorded two negative peaks: one in 1994 and the other in 2004. Today (data from 2019) there are approximately 120 residents, mostly elderly people. There are only two children and less than ten people between the ages of twenty and thirty. Emigration trends in Bënjë – where the total number of residents is 80 – are similar to those in Leusë. Kosinë, since it can be easily reached from Përmet and other nearby cities, and thanks to the availability of flat land which favours agricultural production and ensures easy access to cultivated fields, is the only one of the three villages which has recorded any increase in population (it currently has 956 residents) and the only village that has access to certain primary services.

The greatest challenge today lies in halting the trend of emigration and the consequent abandonment of the region. In Përmet, eco-sustainable and experiential tourism can contribute greatly in creating job opportunities and prompting a circular economy based on the enhancement of local resources and productive capacity. The area of

Përmet is clearly privileged: the wealth of the natural, architectural and food heritage is in fact accompanied by specific, valuable social features, such as a great sense of hospitality and the almost total absence of criminality⁴. This fortunate configuration provides a solid basis on which to establish a new strategic vision capable of increasingly involving those assets of the cultural heritage that have not yet been adequately developed, within a new vision of the future that is still to be revealed.

⁴ According to the *Report of the Attorney General on the State of Criminality for 2018*, Përmet appears as the Albanian municipality with the least criminal procedures, including a drop of 18.03% from the previous year. In the case of certain types of criminal offences (such as theft, for example), not a single case was registered in Përmet, whereas in others it presents rates that oscillate between 1 and 2% of the national average. See <http://www.pp.gov.al/web/raporti_vjetor_2018_1571.pdf> (Last access 10/2020).

Food heritage

Typical products and culinary tradition

The food heritage of Përmet is well-known on a national scale for its typical products (spirits, fruit preserves, dairy, meat, honey and bakery products), which result from the favorable climatic conditions and the rich biodiversity of the area (Adhami, 2001^b).

Përmet boasts a wide variety of wines, liqueurs, syrups, spirits and, in particular, a centuries-old history of artisan production of *raki* (Fig. I-1.1). The excellent quality of Përmet's *raki* is favoured by the autochthonous vine varieties (*rrush pjer-gulle*), but also by the ritual of artisan distillation carried out by the men of the family with the use of special tools (*kazan bakri i kallaisur, kapaku, llulla*, etc.) (Saliu, 2011). The most widely consumed *raki* is undoubtedly the one made with the local grape (*moskat*), yet since the mid-20th century the production made with cultivated (plum, mulberry) or wild fruit (juniper, blackberry, strawberry tree), as well as with aromatic herbs (oregano), has become widespread. Mulberry *raki* (*raki mani*) is highly appreciated for its health benefits. Because of the scarcity of the mulberry tree (especially black mulberry), which once was extensively cultivated in Përmet (Kola, 2002), there is a diminishing production of this *raki*. The varieties of *raki* produced from the homemade distillation of white oregano (*raki rigoni*)¹ and wild or cultivated fruits are very popular in the area of Përmet, but due to a long and laborious preparation process, they are produced in small amounts and mostly for domestic consumption.

¹ See <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/raki-rigoni/>>.



Figure I-1.1
The artisan
preparation of *raki*.
[Courtesy: CESVI,
Albania]

Local wines are characterised by a high percentage of alcohol and a continuity of production since ancient times (roots go back to the Bronze Age²) with autochthonous grape varieties (*debina e bardhë*, *debina e zezë*, and *pulësi*). Evidence of the continuity in the history of wine production in the valley of the Vjosa is found in sale agreements with the Peloponnese, Istanbul and Ohrid (Saliu, 2011). Of particular enological interest is the wine made with the rose hips of the dog-rose (*trëndafili i egër*), rich in vitamin C, yet produced in very small amounts because “the main ingredient is a wild fruit that is picked but not cultivated, and the process requires a lot of time and care”³.

Përmet also produces a wide variety of syrups, which, like spirits, play an important role in hospitality rites. Among these we may mention the following: *liker vere*, a dense and viscous liqueur prepared with red or white wine for domestic use; *lëng mani*, or mulberry juice, commonly used in folk medicine for curing stomatitis and pharyngitis; cornelian cherry sauce (*prevedeja e thanës*) and syrup. In addition, worthy of mention is the rose syrup (*shurup trëndafili*), which is made with rose petals, sugar and lemon. These syrups are usually destined for domestic consumption, and with the exception of the rose syrup, they are becoming increasingly rare.

Few products are as closely linked to the culture of a place as *gliko* is to Përmet. It is a compote of whole fruits, similar to the *slatko* of some Balkan countries, obtained from a variety of fruits and vegetables, all home-produced or cultivated by small local farmers. The particularity of this product lies in its taste and in the preparation process, which involves the use of lime and specialised tools⁴. The most traditional is walnut *gliko* (*gliko arre*) which, in addition to the complete raw nut, uses other ingredients such as lemongrass, geranium flowers, and the peeled kernel of a nut or almond inside of every walnut. *Gliko* made with wild figs, white cherries, aubergines, plums and apri-

² See: <<https://www.turismodelgusto.com/tuttodrink/vini-albania>>.

³ See: <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/bevanda-fermentata-di-rosa-canina-selvatica-veretrendafil-i-eger/>>.

⁴ See <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/presidi-slow-food/gliko-di-permet/>>.

cots is also greatly appreciated. According to the local inhabitants⁵, the artisan production of *gliko* is threatened by industrial production – which is marketed with the same name and at lower prices – and is lacking any safeguard protocol or adequate information campaign (Fig. I-1.2).

This critical aspect has been confirmed by the NGO CESVI, which works together with Slow Food association in enhancing the quality of the product and promoting it on the national and international markets.

There is a wide variety of typical dairy products (mostly from sheep and goat's milk) which evoke the ancient tradition of transhumance: cheese such as *feta* (made from cow, sheep and goat's milk), *djath i napës*, which is matured for 40 days, *kaçkavall* (a matured cheese), ricotta, as well as churned butter and white butter made with goat's milk (Fig. I-1.3). Another tradition derived from transhumance is the cheese known as *salcë shakulli*, which is made from goat or sheep yogurt matured in a wineskin (Fig. I-1.4). The peculiarity of the product lies in the process of preparation and maturing of the cheese⁶ (Fig. I-1.4). These foods, traditionally prepared by shepherds in the mountain pastures of Përmet (Trebeshinë, Dhëmbel and Nemërçkë), are mostly intended for domestic consumption or else for a niche market managed directly by the shepherds themselves.

Also linked to the tradition of transhumance is the gathering of autochthonous medicinal and aromatic herbs used for soups and the fillings of *byrek* (baked pastry) (Figs. I-1.5 and I-1.6).

A product that should deserve more institutional attention is the truffle. The lack of regulation regarding the picking and selling of truffles is causing the gradual impoverishment of the areas of Southern Albania and the consolidation of an illegal market that primarily involves Greece, Italy and France.

The area of Përmet has always been favourable for cattle breeding, from which a wide variety of goat, sheep and pig meat culinary products is derived. A typical product from the area of Dangëllia and Frashër is *pastërma*, dried and salted meat (veal, pork or lamb), which is used in a variety of recipes in com-



Figure I-1.2
Traditional fruit
gliko with cherries
and watermelon
rind. [Courtesy:
CESVI, Albania]



Figure I-1.3
Feta, *kaçkavall* and
ricotta.



Figure I-1.4
Salcë shakulli
cheese maturing
in the Përmet
pastures.

⁵ Interviews held on 29.06.2019, 7.07.2019 and 10.07.2019 in Kosinë.

⁶ See <<https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/salce-shakulli/>>.



Figure I-1.5
A traditional
byrek filled with
spinach and ricotta.
[Courtesy: CESVI,
Albania]



Figure I-1.6
Autochthonous
medicinal and
aromatic herbs.
[Courtesy: CESVI,
Albania]



Figure I-1.7
The *kole*.

bination with beans, onions, leek and cabbage.

Also linked to the consumption of meat are two dishes that use the innards of animals: (1) *kole*, the large intestine filled with spiced veal or pork meat⁷ (Fig. I-1.7), and (2) *kukurec*, which recalls the *stigghiola* of Palermitan cuisine, used in the past for major family gatherings. Certain stews are made with the innards and other less refined parts of the animals, for example *pace këmbe e plënci*, *kapllama*, *shqeto*, *gjella me drudhe* (with a cockerel broth) and *përsheshi me pulë e me arra*, a well appreciated dish made with chicken and traditional crumbled bread (*kulaç*).

Fish-based cuisine is not that varied depending mostly on the only local variety of fish (*buzëtrashi i Vjosës*), now threatened by the levels of pollution of the Vjosa River (Fig. I-1.8).

The large variety of flour-based traditional dishes date back to the cultivation of cereals promoted by the Tanzimat, the administrative reform undertaken during the 19th century for the modernization of the Ottoman Empire (Mile, 1984). This includes several types of bread⁸ and a rich variety of savory pies made with wheat (*lakrori me hithra*) or corn (*pistilli* and *palaniku*) stuffed with vegetables, wild herbs or meat, from which derives the traditional new year's eve dish: *mesnik*.

In the area there is also a widespread and well-known tradition of preserves (*zahiret*)⁹, closely linked to the figure of the housewife (*anvisa*). There is little instead in terms of sweet pastries and cakes. The traditional sweets of the area are *reshedi* and *llokume me bajame*.

⁷ See <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/kole/>>.

⁸ A traditional bread baked by Christian Orthodox families is known as *bukë vale*.

⁹ For example, jams (*reçel ftoi*, *rrushi*, *kumbulle e trëndafili*), pickled vegetables (*turshi patëllxhani*, *arnea me domate*, *arnea me lakër*), dried fruits and vegetables (*fiku i thatë*, *bukëfike*, *domate të thata*), and dried wild fruit (*hoshaf* – wild apples – and *gorica të thata* – almond-leaved pear).

The abundance of sources of nectar in the natural sites has favoured the development of apiculture (wild or practiced with traditional beekeeping techniques) (Fig. I-1.9). The varieties of honey are characterised by high nutritional and curative values and come from the areas of Malëshovë e Frashër, Cerja e Shqërisë and from Mount Nemërçka. The most appreciated honeys are those from strawberry tree (*mjalt mareje*), sage (*mjalti i bedunicës*) and thyme flowers (*trumëza*).

Critical issues and future prospects

The typical products described above are connected to forms of cultivation and artisan production which have been passed on from generation to generation and to environmental conditions that determine unique features. It is a culinary and cultural heritage of undoubted interest that, however, must overcome some challenges (whether general or particular) in order to fully express its potential and to generate socio-economic value for local communities.



Figure I-1.8
A local variety of fish (*buzëtrashi i Vjosës*).



Figure I-1.9
A variety of honey produced with traditional beekeeping techniques.
[Courtesy: CESVI, Albania]

The first of these challenges regards official recognition of the typical products. This, in addition to performing a function that is essential in terms of control and certification, generally contributes in conferring to the products symbolic elements of uniqueness and qualitative identity (see Ciappei, 2006). Although in Albania there is a law (L. 9863/2008) that introduced measures for the recognition of typical products, the scant production levels are an obstacle to the attribution of specificity certifications. To this is added the problem of marketing and the strict hygienic rules adopted by the European Union that slow down the growth of local producers and the sale of their products in the international market.

Another issue concerns the lack of specific studies and research which document the local culinary tradition and would also serve as a repertoire of foods and recipes to be passed on to future generations¹⁰. This aspect is especially relevant in rural areas in Albania that risk losing precious elements of a culinary tradition that is transmitted exclusively in verbal form, because of the intense emigration of the younger population.

Fortunately, in Përmet it is not necessary to start from scratch. During the past few years, thanks to the efforts of the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development, of the Italian NGO CESVI and of Slow Food Association, the food heritage has become an important driver of local development. In this regard, the Pro-Përmet Consortium¹¹ and the Incubator for local typical products (*raki*, dried fruit, etc.) which is located in a former storehouse are noteworthy experiences. The food heritage, in this case, has prompted trickle-down positive effects that include the development of a local production system that enhances food authenticity and the hiring of approximately 100 employees, 60% of whom are women.

This result clearly demonstrates the role that the food heritage can play in the sustainable development of a place, both in economic and socio-cultural terms. This process may also positively influence forms of territorial marketing linked to experiential culinary tourism, a kind of tourism that privileges visitors who appreciate local knowledge, traditions and culture through the diversity of food products. In this perspective, the food heritage is seen as an element of a dynamic system that involves local contexts and activities, productive landscapes, habits and customs of the community, as well as specific knowledge connected to the process of transformation and processing of typical products. This system can be structured in three main categories: the first concerns the strengthening of the product's reputation, the second regards the territorial quality understood as the connection between product, tradition and land, and the third is linked to the knowledge, safeguarding and creative interpretation of traditional knowledge.

¹⁰ An initiative was undertaken in this regard by the Slow Food association which, as a result of on-site research, included in its catalogue of typical foods (Ark of Taste) some typical Albanian delicacies which are at risk of being lost.

¹¹ The Pro-Përmet Consortium is a non-profit association actively involved in the economic development of the territory of the valley of the Vjosa. See: <<http://www.visitpermet.org/permet/index.php/it/pro-permet>>.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Promoting educational projects aimed at the transmission of the food heritage knowledge to local cooks and the reinterpretation of culinary traditions in a contemporary key

These initiatives can be developed through workshops or brief training courses involving the participation of the village elders, farmers and shepherds, in other words of those individuals who are depositaries of knowledge pertaining to ancient food production and processing practices.

The participation of Albanian chefs with professional experience abroad could be very useful. Their contribution could help the participants to reinterpret the culinary tradition in a contemporary key, thus determining a new paradigm that combines tradition and innovation.

A.2 Generating awareness among students concerning the local culinary tradition

The Action aims at promoting the culinary culture of the area in the schools of Përmet through active training courses.

The proposal is to divide the training courses into two phases:

- Active and cooperative learning to be carried out in class through seminars;
- Outdoor learning through workshops and direct practice activities to be carried out outside the school premises during specific periods throughout the year. This phase can also be devised as after-school activities at the homes of village elders for small groups of students, in order to give them the opportunity to see, touch and learn everything that concerns typical food products and their processing and transformation in a domestic context^(a).

In order to implement this Action, it is necessary to place at its centre the competencies of the school and to actively involve the older inhabitants who safeguard the local traditional culinary knowledge. NGOs and cultural associations that are active in the recovery of traditional products and in enhancement of traditional cuisine could provide an important contribution to this Action.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.3 Creating a Digital Inventory of Traditional Recipes and Memories of local culinary culture^(b)

The Action aims at documenting and cataloguing typical recipes from the culinary tradition of Përmet, which will result in the drafting of a *Digital Inventory*, understood as a tool for the knowledge of the food heritage and as an archive of memories to be passed on to future generations.

The acquisition of information should take place in the field in accordance with appropriate cataloguing methods and be complemented by audio-visual documentation.

The information sheets should include the following contents:

- The history and provenance of the recipe;
- The raw materials used and their main physical, chemical, microbiological and nutritional qualities;
- Processing and production techniques (preservation, maturing, etc.);
- The traditional tools used in the production process.

It would be necessary to devote some attention to the activity concerning the audio-visual documentation of ancient food-processing practices and traditional tools, as elements that greatly influence the quality and flavour of the traditional dishes, in view of their gradual substitution with current processes and tools. This Action could be promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and by the Gjirokastrë Regional Government, while the implementation on the territory could be managed by the Municipality of Përmet, involving in it NGOs, as well as experts in food science, anthropologists and enologists.

The *Digital Inventory* could be disseminated both at the local scale and through an *ad hoc* geoportal created by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for safeguarding and enhancing the country's culinary culture^(c).

A.4 Creating an Atlas of Typical Local Products

The *Atlas of Typical Local Products*^(d) aims at collecting and narrating the wealth and variety which the culinary heritage of the area has to offer, through the mapping of the places of production of typical products, the description of the types of foods and the recognition of the producers who work using traditional techniques.

This dissemination tool could be used to link the various individual places of productions so as to create some 'itineraries of taste'. It could then be used as a pretext to describe the food practices and rural lifestyles of places, as well as a tool for enhancing the landscape resources and cultural sites of the area in question.

The drafting of the *Atlas* could be entrusted to the NGOs and cultural associations active in the field of the recovery of traditional products and the enhancement of the traditional cuisine of Përmet; it would be available online and continuously implementable.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Recognition of typical products in accordance with Law 9863/2008

This Action abides by the procedures for obtaining the National Food Quality Certifications, in accordance with those articles of L. 9863/2008 which regulate the Origin and Geographical Indications of food products (Përcaktimi i origjinës dhe i treguesve gjeografikë të ushqimeve – art. 32) and the Indication of the traditional food products (Treguesi "Produkt ushqimor tradicional" i ushqimit – art. 33). First of all it is necessary to identify those typical products that may reasonably aspire to the said certification; their recognition as such would ensure their safeguarding and allow for greater food safety. For products for which a recognition procedure has not been started yet, it is advisable to initiate the registration procedures for obtaining the brands "Tregues Gjeografik i Mbrojtur" (Protected Geographical Indication, art. 32) and "Produkt Ushqimor Tradicional" (Traditional Food Product, art. 33) for the following typical products: fine varieties of *raki* (mulberry, oregano, strawberry tree or other wild fruits); *shurup trëndafili*; *salcë shakulli*, and *djath nape* cheeses; *kole*; *pastërma*; fine varieties of honey (*mare*, *bedunicës* and *trumëza*).

Afterwards, it would be desirable to encourage association initiatives among the local producers of the selected food products in order for them to present the request for recognition before the competent entities, in accordance with the relative laws and regulations in force.

A systemic cooperation would be needed among public and private entities (local institutions, NGOs, Albanian companies with experience in the field of the recognition of typical products) for the formulation of the application.

A.6 Assessing the UNESCO Cultural Heritage candidacy requirements for typical local food products

This Action is aimed at the creation of a study group for assessing the possibility of presenting the candidacy of two typical local products – *gliko* and *salcë shakulli* cheese – to be listed by UNESCO as intangible heritage.

Gliko is part of Përmet identity: it has emphasised for generations the values of hospitality and community spirit. The product presents authenticity features not only in terms of quality, but also in terms of production processes, respect for the maturing of raw materials and safeguarding of ancient artisan traditions. In the case of *salcë shakulli* it is precisely the preparation, jealously safeguarded by generations of shepherds, which constitutes a cultural *unicum*. This cheese represents a 'rite' symbolically connected to transhumance and is the result of a laborious production technique which goes back to the sage practice of recycling (milk, animal hides, locally invented work-tools, etc.)^(e).

A.7 Promoting experiential tourism for enhancing the local culinary heritage and preventing land abandonment

Promoting the culinary heritage through cooking courses and tasting itineraries, together with experiential tourism, could represent a great opportunity for the area of Përmet. From this point of view, tourist activities could be based on the concept of 'doing or cooking together', which involves the visitor in the experience of preparing a dish or a typical product with the help of the local inhabitants (the elderly, shepherds, fishermen, etc.).

‘Doing or cooking together’ is a process that begins with the gathering of raw materials, continues with their transformation and ends with the consumption of the final product, all following local ancient customs. At the same time, participants have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the everyday lives of the rural community they are visiting.

The initiative could be undertaken in different contexts, such as:

- In village homes, in the case of the preparation of typical dishes and other artisan home-cooking products (*raki, gliko, zahiret*, etc.);
- On the River Vjosa, recognised for the quality of the typical fish known as *buzëtrash i Vjosës*, to enjoy the experience of “fish and eat” (participation in the rite of fishing, preparing, cooking and eating fish directly on the spot);
- In mountain huts on the Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë mountain range, in the case of the preparation and tasting of dairy products linked to the tradition of transhumance. The objective of this initiative is to discover life in the mountain pastures, the production process of mountain hut products, such as *salcë shakulli* and *djath nape* cheese, and to generate awareness and appreciation for the authentic specificities of the food products. The place, in this case, expresses the inner lives, the history and identity of shepherds and their activities. The huts can also provide temporary accommodation in order to give the visitor the possibility of enjoying a more complete experience in direct contact with shepherds. This initiative could be linked to other itinerant events to be organized on the trails and alpine pastures, aimed at the landscape and the culinary enhancement.

This tourism supply can be combined with other initiatives connected to the recovery and enhancement of Përmet’s traditions (see chap. I.2).

Notes

- a) A similar event is “Gatesat me gjyshet” (Cooking with grandmothers), which takes place in Kosinë every year on August 14 (see chap. I.2).
- b) A positive initiative was undertaken by the NGO CESVI that, in collaboration with the local community, is gathering information on typical products and recipes belonging to the culinary tradition of the area of Përmet in order to bring them to the attention of the Ark of Taste (Slow Food).
- c) For a similar experience, see the initiative promoted in Italy by the Ministry for the Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. (See <https://www.culturalimentare.beniculturali.it/mibact_paci>).
- d) The Action is inspired by the Atlante dei prodotti della Lombardia (see: <<https://www.regione.lombardia.it/wps/wcm/connect/3f8b0f75-6817-4ddf-a70d-6d421bb28404/Atlante+prodotti+della+Lombardia+2017.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-3f8b0f75-6817-4ddf-a70d-6d421bb28404-mpj1psg>>. See also the Atlante dei Prodotti Agroalimentari del Trentino, promoted by the Autonomous Province of Trento (<<http://www.trentinoagricoltura.it/Trentino-Agricoltura/Pubblicazioni2/Monografie/Atlante-dei-Prodotti-Agroalimentari-del-Trentino-edizione-2012>>).
- e) See (from minute 19): <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wne-kGbwGg&t=1051s>>.

Traditions, social practices and local craftsmanship

Traditions and cultural heritage

The villages of Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë enjoy the privilege of belonging to a geographic and cultural area that is known for the hospitality of its inhabitants and is rich in traditions appreciated throughout the country for their beauty and expressiveness.

The sacredness of the guest is a well-known concept in Albanian culture and in the area of Përmet the respect for the ‘stranger’ is even more intense. Homes are literally opened and made available to the visitor, who is offered traditional culinary products that always accompany the rite of welcoming. In the past, when a guest visited the house for the first time a lamb or kid was slaughtered, a luxury which the owners themselves could ill afford in their everyday lives. In particular, the head of the animal was offered to the guest as a sign of respect. The welcoming rite was organised in both spatial and social terms: the guest would be seated in one of the corners of the *oda* (the main room of the house), generally situated opposite to the place where the master of the house sat; brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews and sometimes even first degree cousins would participate in the banquet and often would invite the guest to lunch or dinner in their own homes. A shared conviviality was thus triggered, providing opportunities for cultivating friendship and social interaction in a circular manner (Saliu, 2011). Although the rite of hospitality has suffered a gradual weakening, because of the deep changes that have taken place both during the time of the Communist regime and over the past few decades, it is still alive and well, albeit in different forms.

Përmet belongs to the cultural territory of *tosk* iso-polyphony, whose most illustrious representative is Laver Bariu (Nurka) – who was born in Përmet in 1926 (Fig. I-2.1). The folk groups that he has sung and played with (traditionally known as *saze*), or those he has formed himself, represent the apex of artistic quality and musical production between 1950 and 1990 (Tole, 2007). A street in Përmet is named after Bariu,

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Figure I-2.1
Laver Bariu,
the well-known
iso-polyphony
musician from
Përmet. [Courtesy:
Roland Tasho]

and a commemorative plaque is placed on the facade of the building where he lived until his death in 2014.

Përmet has distinguished itself for its inhabitants' devotion and passion for knowledge and study since the second half of the 19th century, when primary and secondary instruction was beginning to become widespread throughout the country (Dragoj, 2013). There were schools in many villages and until the early 20th century, the language of education was Greek¹. In 1909 – during the Congress of Dibra – the representatives of the Sublime Porte accepted the requests of the local population to open schools in Albanian, giving the opportunity to choose between the Arab or Latin alphabet. Albanians chose the Latin alphabet and began immediately to prepare for opening schools. The first Albanian language school in the area of Përmet was located in the village of Badëlonjë (Saliu, 2011). By 1920 there were schools also in Leusë and Kosinë. In Bënjë, instead, the school had deeper roots: the building was built immediately after the church (therefore after 1879) and one of its first teachers was Ilia Dilo (Sheperi), an intellectual who taught in Bënjë from 1883 to 1895. Dilo kept an intense correspondence with the brothers Frashëri and with Andon Zako Çajupi (famous literary figures of the time), and in 1927 published in Vlorë one of the most celebrated books on Albanian grammar.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the tradition of the cultivation of roses, which led to the denomination of Përmet as “the city of roses” (Saliu, 2011). Still today, during the flowering, in the streets of the city and alleys of villages, roses of different colours and varieties are seen at the entrances of gardens, peeping over enclosure walls (*avlli*) or even climbing house facades.

¹ The Ottoman Empire had been tolerant toward the choice language of instruction in the schools. The proximity to Greece and the constant influence of Orthodox Christian religion in the area of Përmet had originally determined the adoption of the Greek language.

Traditional festivities

Traditional festivities were numerous and often involved the inhabitants of various villages in the area. Among these, it is mostly religious feasts that have survived.

The Feast of the Dormition of Mary is celebrated in Leusë and Kosinë according to a ritual (which takes place throughout all of Southern Albania) that gathers people around the church on the night of August 14 and concludes with a mass in honour of the Virgin Mary on the following morning. Many migrants who return to their places of origin for the summer holiday also participate in the feast. While in Leusë the religious ritual takes place in an intimate atmosphere, in Kosinë the social interaction seems to prevail and music or events linked to the local culinary tradition accompany the celebration. In the church of Bënjë (also dedicated to the Virgin Mary), instead, the feast takes place on November 21 (the day of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary) and is strongly linked to the tradition of healing miracles. In the past, after the mass there was a small concert of *saze*, which contributed to enkindle the atmosphere and prepared the ground for the ‘profane’ feasts, with banquets full of culinary delicacies cooked by the women of the village.

Unlike the other two villages, Kosinë is distinguished from the religious point of view by the entrenched presence of a Bektashi community. The most important Bektashi feast is known as “Sultan Nevruz” (Nevruz literally means “new year” in the Persian language). On that occasion, the Bektashi faithful gather in their place of worship (*teqe*) for prayer. In the case of Kosinë, the nearest *teqe* is the one in the nearby village of Alipostivan, which is also a holy place of pilgrimage. In Kosinë there is also a non-Bektashi Muslim minority, mostly consisting of women who came from nearby villages as wives to Orthodox and Bektashi families. Mixed marriages are very common in the area of Përmet and are a good example of the religious tolerance in this region of Albania.

Local craftsmanship

Traditional crafts in Përmet are closely linked to the history of its weekly market. It used to take place within an orthogonal grid of courtyards and alleys on which stood the workshops of artisans and the shops of merchants². Its origins date back to the second half of the 19th century.

In Përmet, as early as 1922 there were 342 artisans and 123 workshops, among which 16 cobbler shops, 21 tailor shops and 22 *opingarë* (shoemakers); it also included 21 water mills, which provided flour to 3 bakeries. Many labourers worked in the 16 stone quarries and the 42 workshops with *avlimende* (weaving looms), where the women were regularly employed or even self-employed. There were also 2 tinsmiths, a watchmaker and 2 tanners (Dragoj, 2013).

The market of Përmet began its decline during the Thirties³ and completely disappeared during World War II (Adhami, 2001^b) with its dramatic consequences: the city and the surrounding villages were burned or bombed, the livestock and harvests lost, the shops and artisan production endangered.

² The market included a vast area of the current urban park, in the proximity of the city’s former church.

³ For Adhami (2001^b) only due to King Zog’s inefficient policies; for Dragoj (2013), also as a result of the economic crisis of 1929.

The collectivisation process undertaken by the Communist regime during the after-war period, through agrarian reforms and the creation of state-run cooperatives, radically changed the economy of the country and consequently that of Përmet; artisan production was gradually replaced by industrial production guided by specific artistic directives derived from a unitary language and aimed at both domestic demand and exportation⁴.

During the Nineties, as a result of great social and economic changes, what remained of popular culture during the years of the regime was further lost, both in Përmet and in the rest of Albania.

Artifacts and work tools

The territory of Përmet offers a distinguished artisan tradition, as can be seen by visiting the Museum at the Multifunctional Centre of the city which houses valuable examples of tools and decorative objects in stone, copper, bronze, wood, finely embroidered fabrics, intertwined objects of vegetable fibres, etc. (Fig. I-2.2).

Traditional tools and furniture which were widespread throughout Albania could also be found in the houses of peasants in the area of Përmet: *sofër* (table), *magje* (kneading trough), *djep* (cradle), *dybek* (butter churn), as well as a variety of containers for water, spirits and dairy products, some in wood and others made from animal hides (Fig. I-2.3). Artifacts and work tools were produced by those who used them (peasants, shepherds, etc.)⁵, or else were made by “nomadic artisans”⁶ (among whom there



Figure I-2.2
Wood
craftsmanship:
a detail of the
iconostasis in the
Church of the
Dormition of Mary
in Leusë.

⁴ Export was limited to cheap products, such as souvenirs and ornaments.

⁵ In the farming sector, ploughs with metal parts were only introduced between the two world wars, mainly imported from Greece, Italy and Czechoslovakia (Shkurti, 1985).

⁶ This refers to the artisans of the *Jevgjit* community, which perhaps emigrated from Egypt during the Turkish invasions of the 15th century, as well as to those of the *Cigan* (or Romani) community, who came from North-West India during the Middle Ages). These communities settled throughout the Balkans, Albania included.

were skilled smiths) – whose women were well-known for basket weaving, wickerwork and embroidery. They would operate through a door-to-door or made-to-order service (Adhami, 2001^b).

Also the artisan production of the traditional dress and wool fabrics were linked to the skills of women in weaving and embroidery (Saliu, 2011). The use of the traditional dress in Përmet was widespread until the mid-20th century (Dojaka, 2017), after which certain accessories – such as the *guna* (a sort of raw wool cloak, which reached the feet) – were used exclusively by shepherds. With the establishment of the Communist regime and as a result of ideological as well as practical reasons linked to the organisation of work and of collective life, the habit of wearing traditional dress was gradually aban-



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Figure I-2.3 – A handcrafted kitchen utensil (known as *saç*) for cooking traditional food.

Figure I-2.4 – A woman practicing the embroidery tradition. [Courtesy: CESVI, Albania]

Figure I-2.5 – The art of working fabrics with the traditional *avlimend*. [Courtesy: CESVI, Albania]

done. Most of the traditional garments that are found today in the area of Përmet (as in most of Albania) are unfortunately industrially produced, due to both of the loss of traditional know-how and of the high cost of raw materials and labour.

Two other instruments which were widespread and connected to female work are the weaving loom (*avlimend*) (Onuzi, 1985) (Fig. I-2.4) and the *dërstilë*, a complex mechanism used for washing fabrics, especially those made of wool and of large dimensions, such as blankets (Saliu, 2011). The *avlimend* was usually placed in a special area within the domestic courtyard, yet there are cases – as Adhami (2001^b) points out – in which several of these devices are placed in a collective space (Fig. I-2.5). The *dërstilë* was generally placed inside mills, as in the *Mulliri i Drithit* of Bënjë (see sect. II.2.2), which had one of the largest *dërstile* in Albania.

In the area of Përmet there are currently approximately fifty craftsmen working in the production of artifacts, gathered in six main activities: basket weaving, knitwear and tailoring, pyrography, coppersmiths, stonemasons and carpenters. Unfortunately, only about half of these artisans are still active⁷.

Traditional building

Building workers were especially active during the period between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when great civil works were built (Mile, 1984; Muka, 2007; Meksi *et al.*, 2016) (Figs. I-2.6 and I-2.7).



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Figure I-2.6 – Leusë. A traditional pavement in kalldrëm.

Figure I-2.7 – Leusë. A traditional roof covering made of dry-assembled stone slabs.

⁷ Source: NGO CESVI, Përmet.

Testimonies on the role and capacity of the foremen in the area of the Vjosa Valley of the have reached our days through the chronicles of travelers from the North of Europe (see Leake, 1835). Their accounts speak, in particular, of the exceptional skills of the itinerant and seasonal master builders (*mjeshttrat shëtitës stinorë*) (Muka, 2007) who went from village to village searching for work opportunities⁸ (see Brunnbauer, 2004). According to Muka (2007), the fame of these builders was so great and widespread throughout the Ottoman Empire that it has remained reflected in the Turkish language. For example, the road pavement involving the use of river pebbles or split stones (*kalldrëm*), is still known as *arnavut kaldırım* (literally Albanian cobblestones). The itinerant master builders were organised (under the direction of a foreman), into groups of 10-12 people plus 2-3 apprentices (often family members), as well as 3-4 *argat* (unpaid helpers). Like the members of a coterie, they communicated in a professional language known as *purishte* (Muka, 2007, citing M. Kaucky).

After the Balkan wars and World War I, the new borders between Albania and Greece reduced the area of action of the itinerant master builders; in the following years, they gradually disappeared (Muka, 2007).

Critical issues and future prospects

The recovery and strengthening of traditions and rituals at the community scale, in addition to positively influencing the consolidation of identity processes, can also trigger the development of the experiential forms of tourism, which these Guidelines wish to promote. Unfortunately, in Albania, and especially in rural areas, years of Communist regime and the constant migration of the younger and more active sectors of the population have effectively weakened both artisan culture and entrepreneurship. To this must be added the general reluctance of Albanians towards the cooperative associations, which could play an important role in the development processes as well as in terms of social cohesion⁹.

Përmet is not immune to this general condition. However, some specific anthropological and social potentialities confer on the area a privileged status with respect to other rural contexts in Albania. First of all, Përmet and its villages can rely on a great wealth of traditions handed down from generation to generation. To this must be added the great availability of the inhabitants to get involved, as was shown, for instance, by their participation in the projects devoted to the recovery of old crafts organised by the NGOs operating in the area¹⁰.

It is on this basis that several policies and actions can be realistically activated, with the aim of reshaping inherited cultural models into new updated versions.

⁸ According to Pichler (cit. in Brunnbauer, 2004) in the nearby region of Kurvelesh, construction work was the main form of itinerant labour.

⁹ This reluctance, at least in part, could be interpreted as a form of reaction against the days of the Communist regime when, with the abolishment of private property, cooperative production was imposed on the population.

¹⁰ See, for instance, "Nuove possibilità di inclusione sociale delle donne e giovani disoccupati nelle aree rurali", a project born in 2015 from the collaboration among two NGOs (CESVI and Milieukontakt) and the Municipality of Përmet.

Intervention strategies

S1 Educational and Training Strategies

A.1 Promoting educational projects aimed at the creation of new skills and job opportunities in the craftsmanship sector

This Action aims at providing knowledge and skills related to the craftsmanship sector (see A.5). It is developed through the following educational projects:

- *Workshop on art and craft design*, involving Albanian professional designers and teachers from the faculties of Architecture and Design, Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. They, together with local artisans, could guide the trainees toward forms of experimentation with hand-made processes, thus opening new perspectives for the production of artifacts belonging to the local tradition. Workers from the cooperatives and state-owned artistic enterprises from the time of the Communist regime could also play an active role in this project. Although these workers previously operated in a serial production system, their knowledge and technical skills are an essential link with traditional artisan know-how, as well as a precious testimony of the processes of transformation of historical crafts which took place during the Communist period⁽⁶⁾;
- *Summer school on traditional craft*, involving Albanian artisans who have carried out their work abroad. In order to broaden knowledge, part of the educational activities could be undertaken abroad, in similar contexts to Përmet;
- *“Yard-school” on the restoration of the cultural heritage*, involving local master craftsmen. The purpose is to provide the trainees with practical knowledge and skills relating to the processing of traditional building materials and components (flagstones for roofs, stone cornices, wooden doors and windows, roof carpentry, etc.) allowing them to apply the acquired competencies in the restoration of a real building.

S3 Social Cohesion Strategies

A.2 Promoting the transfer of tacit knowledge through inter-generational meetings in schools

The Action aims at involving the elderly population of the villages in activities that include a dialogue with school students. The telling of autobiographical stories can contribute to maintain alive the traditions and help to rebuild a collective memory through which current social needs can be better understood and addressed. This would re-activate an inter-generational communication, which has been weakened by the mass emigration of young people from the villages.

The Action could be carried out at the elementary and middle schools in Përmet and in the surrounding villages.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.3 Drafting of a Technical Handbook on Traditional Local Building

This Action is aimed at the transmission of technical information regarding materials and building techniques used in traditional building in the Region of Gjirokastër. The handbook, in addition to being a useful tool for the restoration and renovation of those traditional buildings which have survived years of abandonment and neglect, should be aimed at avoiding the dispersion of practical knowledge linked to local artisan know-how (for example carpentry work, roofing, stone paving, decoration and finishes, etc.).

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.4 Creating a Museum of Iso-Polyphonic Music in Përmet

This proposal contemplates the establishment of a place devoted to the history of iso-polyphony, including the exhibition of musical instruments, photographic documentation and interactive panels with audio and video material. Visitors could listen to *tosk* polyphonic music while enjoying a *raki* or a *gliko*. A specific section could be devoted to the figure of Laver Bariu, a native of Përmet, considering the importance of the master in the musical history of the country.

A.5 Fostering the creation of a new craft business

This Action is based on the educational projects described in Action A.1. It could be supported by the NGOs operating in the area of Përmet and developed in two different categories:

1. Enterprises or cooperatives involved in the production of everyday artifacts and ornaments and in the restoration of historical buildings with the use of local materials and traditional techniques. They require the know-how and experience of the last remaining artisans who are still active;
2. Enterprises or cooperatives who aim at innovating the sector of traditional crafts (*art and craft design*). They require close collaboration between professional designers and local craftsmen.

A.6 Building a local products marketplace in Përmet

The historic market of Përmet has been for centuries the fulcrum of the city's economy.

This Action aims at building a small market hall that could stimulate and provide visibility for the typical culinary and artisan products of the area, serving also as a magnet for tourism.

The choice of the building area, in addition to being easy to reach, must be based on quantitative assessments (indoor and open-air spaces for exhibition and sale of products and artefacts; space for tasting food products, etc.) and in accordance with the needs of potential sellers (inhabitants, artisans, farmers, shepherds).

A.7 Promoting the area through local feasts and festivals

The Action aims to promote the organisation of local feasts and festivals, especially during the summer, that can help to increase the attraction, in terms of tourism, of a region full of traditions such as Përmet. This would involve both recovering ancient events from traditional culture and devising new ones, thus creating a *Calendar of the festivities of the Vjosa Valley*.

The inclusion of some of these festivities in the *National Calendar of Local Festivities* is one of the objectives of this Action^(b).

FEAST OF SHËN GJINI (ST. JOHN) IN BËNJË

This feast – which takes place on June 22 – belongs to the tradition of the villages of Përmet, and expresses some pagan elements related to the summer solstice. In the past the young people would light bonfires and a competition would ensue between neighbouring villages (for example between Bënjë, Novoselë and Ogdunan) to establish which was the more intense and long-lasting bonfire (Kola, 2002). Today, as a result of rural depopulation, this feast is almost forgotten.

FEAST OF THE HARVEST IN BËNJË

Festivities in Bënjë used to take place on one of the threshing floors (*lëm*) of the village and were accompanied by bonfires lighted with straw from the new harvest. Also in this case a pagan element is involved, related to the rites of fertility of the land (Muka, 2007). The proposed date is September 21, the day of the autumn equinox. The festival could be itinerant: it could begin on the *lëm* of the village with the lighting of the bonfire and then move to the *Mulliri i Drithit*, an important place for the memory of agricultural traditions in the village, where the festivities could be accompanied by traditional music (see A.9.1, chap. I.3). A refreshment area could be prepared for the occasion, to taste the products of the local cuisine.

STREET FESTIVAL IN LEUSË

A festival along the narrow streets of Leusë could be arranged in correspondence with the Feast of the Dormition of Mary (August 14). Tourists and inhabitants - including emigrants who return to the village in the summer - could meet, sit on *sofate*^(c) and taste local food inside the courtyards, while listening to live music performed by local folk groups.

“THE DAY OF ROSES” IN PËRMET

Since roses are the symbol of Përmet, a festival could be devoted to them during their blooming period, which is also when food products which use rose petals are prepared in the homes of Përmet (rose syrups and jams).

The festival could offer the inhabitants the double opportunity of exhibiting the varieties of roses belonging to the area and of preparing, tasting and selling food products made with rose petals (see Chapter I.1).

The *Calendar of the festivities of the Vjosa Valley* could be disseminated through the website of the Municipality of Përmet as well as the websites of the NGOs, the associations for the promotion of tourism and the tour operators active in the area.

A.8 Enhancing the tradition of cultivating roses

The Action aims at promoting and strengthening a peculiar tradition of Përmet and to enhance the appearance of the town and villages. It could involve both the management of green public areas and care of the courtyards of houses. In the urban park of Përmet, in particular, a rose garden could be cultivated with all the autochthonous rose varieties from the South of Albania.

The application of the Action on private property should include the free distribution of seeds to people willing to participate; in the villages, it may be useful to rely on the village headmen (*kryepleq*) to inform the inhabitants of the community they represent.

S7 Management Strategies

A.9 Establishing forms of support for artisan enterprises

In order to address the needs for development and innovation presented in Action A.5, the new artisan enterprises require a support action divided into the following activities^(d):

- Market analysis and studies, as well as definition of perspectives of development for identifying ‘targets’ (inhabitants, tourists, etc.);
- Support for the local artisan workforce by specialists for the manufacture of competitive products, not only for tourism-related demand, but also for the domestic market;
- Intermediation and promotion support for the marketing of artisan products.

The NGOs that operate in the area of Përmet could offer a useful contribution in the implementation of this Action.

Notes

- a) The Central State Film Archive (AQSHF – Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror i Filmit) is an essential source of information on the activities of cooperatives and artistic companies operating during the Communist regime.
- b) Concerning the three villages of Përmet which are the subject of our study, the only festivity which is included in the *National Calendar of Local Festivities* for the year 2019 is the Feast of the Dormition of Mary in Kosinë (August 14). See <<http://www.mjedisi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Kalendari-2019.pdf>>.
- c) The *sofat* is made up of two masonry benches placed on the sides of the entrance door to the house courtyard. See chapter I.4.
- d) The Pro-Përmet Consortium, a Group for Local Action (GLA), currently provides support to local producers and merchants, mainly from an administrative and fiscal perspective.

Landscape

The area of the Municipality of Përmet shows a mosaic of heterogeneous landscapes that have resulted from a sedimentation of signs and traces that nature and the local communities have left over time (Fig. I-3.1).

This chapter analyses the main features of the landscape heritage, focusing on the villages of Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë.

The natural landscape

The predominant value of Përmet's landscape lies in the contrast between the vast natural areas of conifer and broadleaf forests and other areas where shrub/sclerophyll formations and bare rock prevail. More than 50% of the territorial surface has been declared a National Park, through Decree no. 1631 of the Council of Ministers, dated 17.12.2008. The park – known as “Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli” – extends throughout the N-E area comprising the village of Bënjë and the Lengarica River (Fig. I-3.2).

Bënjë is located in a high hilly area that reaches a maximum altitude of 898 metres above sea level. The hills are shaped by the steep slopes that abruptly dissolve in narrow valleys marked by the erosion of the many watercourses. The soil is composed of very heterogeneous *facies* of flysch, with a prevailing presence of argillite, siltstone and sandstone, with layers of calcareous olistoliths (Fig. I-3.3).

Given their geomorphological composition, the slopes that develop in a N-E direction are also subject to landslides, due to the intense surface erosion (Bashkia Përmet, 2020).

A similar situation occurs in Leusë. The village has the same geological composition, yet is entirely located on an area that suffers from hydro-geological instability. The area features a number of hills with slopes of varying degrees of inclination that descend in a S-N direction, with a maximum altitude of 673 metres above sea level.



Figure I-3.1
The Vjosa Valley
seen from Leusë.

Figure I-3.2
A scenic view of the
natural landscape
in Bënjë.

Figure I-3.3
Bënjë. The
soil's geological
composition shows
intense superficial
erosion.

Much of the forest areas consist of artificial plant formations with a prevalence of pines (wild, maritime, black) and acacia, which resulted from the reforestation campaigns promoted by the Communist regime from 1965 onward. The soil has a dense presence of trees, which alternate with outcrops of bare rock and sections with partial covering of spontaneous vegetation. Where slopes are less steep, as in the area to the east of the village, land is used for shrubby pastures or for herbaceous crops cultivations (Fig. I-3.4).

Although the village of Kosinë presents the same geological features as Bënjë and Leusë, it is morphologically more varied and complex, as a result of a mixture of hills and plains. Next to the arable land along the Vjosa Valley, in the direction of the low hills (which do not rise higher than 400 metres above sea level), there are limited parts of the land with gullies and grazing areas. Newly planted forest vegetation is also present, consisting mostly of chestnut groves and pines (Fig. I-3.5).

The water landscape

The water landscape is a result of a rich hydrological heritage and natural and anthropic elements. Its features are so ingrained in the context as to constitute a highly remarkable monumental and identity defining landscape. The hydrographic basin of Përmet consists of the Vjosa River and its tributaries, Lemnica and Lengarica. Vjosa is the longest watercourse in Southern Albania. It originates in the lower Pindus, near the Zygo pass in mount Smolikas, in Greece (Fasolo, 2005) (Fig. I-3.6).



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Figure I-3.4 – Leusë. A rural life scene with a pine forest in the background.

Figure I-3.5 – A grazing area and new forestry plantation in the surroundings of Kosinë.



Figure I-3.6
The Lengarica
River in the
surroundings of
Bënjë.

The valley of the Vjosa has guided and affected the origin of many settlements (Saliu, 2011) and the infrastructure network of the area, together with the ancient roads that connected Epirus to Thessaly in one direction and Illyria and the Adriatic Sea in the other. Although the Vjosa is the main feature of the river landscape, several minor watercourses crisscross the region under scrutiny.

The water landscape of Leusë and Kosinë stands out for its linear-oriented streams that flow straight from the adjacent mountain ranges, shaping the steep slopes of the hills. Minor watercourses are flanked by a rich riparian vegetation, both arboreal and shrub-like, and often show signs of problems linked to the lack of maintenance (Fig. I-3.7).

The case of Bënjë is connoted instead by a more varied and complex water landscape caused by the passage of the Lengarica River. The Lengarica Valley includes numer-



Figure I-3.7
Leusë. Minor
watercourses
flanked by a rich
(arboreal and
shrub) riparian
vegetation.

ous landscape assets and is also a strategic area due to the meeting of roads that connect the region of Dangëllia to the villages of Sheqeri and Kolonjë. The first element that presents an evident landscape value is the Lengarica Canyon, which was declared a Natural Monument in 2002¹. This canyon is a long and deep cut that reveals layers of calcareous rock, created by the eroding activity of the Lengarica River. The steep walls in the karstic ecosystem, together with the multi-colour shades that are gradually revealed, turn the canyon into a natural work of art. The canyon stretches across a length of almost 4 km, with a height of up to 100 m and a width that varies between 20 and 30 m (Fig. I-3.8).

Along the canyon, there is a vast system of karstic caves, some of which are connected through tunnels (Bashkia Përmet, 2020). Worth mentioning are the Katiu and Pëllumbave Caves, which were used as prehistorical settlements during the Neolithic (2200-2000 B.C.) and presumably abandoned around 1000 B.C., when the inhabitants moved to the villages of Dedejan, Lëkurës and Rezës (Saliu, 2011) (Fig. 1-3.9). These two caves were discovered by an archaeological expedition in 1978 (Kola, 2002). Many utensils and fragments of ceramic vases were found revealing a great wealth and variety of decorations, as well as great mastery of the decorative technique known as “Devoll style”, which has also been found in caves located in the area of Korça, specifically in Mat and Tren (Saliu, 2011). These two sites – which according to Kola (2002) are the oldest population settlements in the area of Bënjë and of Albania – bear witness to manifestations of the culture and artistic know-how which have been preserved to this day. It is not surprising that the caves were declared “cultural monuments” by the Ministry of Culture². Katiu Cave, which is located to the west in proximity of the thermal springs of Bënjë, is difficult to access due to the lack of implementation of safety measures concerning the rocky wall above the entrance; whereas Pëllumbave Cave, located to the east of the canyon, cannot be reached on foot due to its steep location on the rocky cliff.

The Lengarica River offers one of the most remarkable anthropised water landscapes remaining in the area of Përmet as witnessed by the thermal springs of Bënjë whose waters have been appreciated since antiquity for their curative properties³. They belong to the vast geothermal system that extends from the Lengarica River to the gorge of Vormoner on the Sarandoporos River in Greece.

Katiu Bridge⁴ stands elegantly above the thermal baths becoming a part of the river landscape. Thanks to its aesthetic value, it confers identity and character to the whole natural area (Fig. I-3.10). The bridge soars above the river, linking the villages of Bënjë and Delvinë in Shqeri. It is part of a system of 17 bridges built in the area of Përmet between the 16th and 18th centuries, only a few of which remain to this day (Saliu, 2011)⁵.

In addition to Katiu Bridge, in Bënjë – upon the stream of Bënjë (*përroi i Bënjës*) – there are two other bridges, both Cultural Monuments: *Ura e Bënjës* (Bënjë Bridge)⁶, at

¹ Decree of the Council of Ministers no. 676 of 20.12.2002.

² Decree no. 184 of 6.5.2015.

³ The springs of *Banjat e Bënjës* have been visited for centuries by peasants to cure ailments, especially scabies and some animal diseases.

⁴ Declared category I Cultural Monument, by the Ministry of Education and Culture, with Decree no. 1886 of 10.06.1973.

⁵ Katiu Bridge is described in sect. I.5.1.

⁶ Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture no. 1886 of 10.06.1973.



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Figure I-3.8 – View of the Lengarica Canyon, Bënjë.

Figure I-3.9 – Katiu and Pëllumbave Caves: prehistoric settlements dating back to the Neolithic period.

Figure I-3.10 – The landscape of the Lengarica River near the Katiu Bridge and the thermal baths.

Figure I-3.11 – Bënjë Bridge upon the *përroi i Bënjës*.

the entrance to the village; and *Ura e Dashit*⁷ (now in ruins), located on the boundary with the village of Vinjah (Fig. I-3.10).

These three bridges are tangible signs of the ancient history of the village in close physical relation and in harmony with the natural components of the place.

Another singular element in the fluvial landscape of the Leengarica River is the watermill *Mulliri i Drithit*. Since the early 20th century the mills, managed mostly by old noble families or by the Church, constituted an essential component of the agro-food production system based on grain produced in Korça (Adhami, 2002). Thanks to the wealth of watercourses, they became widespread throughout the entire region of Përmet, and in particular along the banks of the *përroi i Bardhë* River. The construction of *Mulliri i Drithit* dates back to 1878 and is a rare case in Albania of a fortified mill (Adhami, 2002). It consists of a space for the grinding of cereals and another destined to the washing of wools and fabrics through a mechanism known as *dërstilë* (Stylla, 2011). Despite its value, which has been recognised by a ministerial decree⁸, *Mulliri i Drithit* is in a state of ruin (Fig. I-3.12). In any case, it is the only remaining link between the river, agriculture and the surviving communities; of all the other ancient mills in the area, there are in fact no traces.

The agricultural landscape

The agricultural landscape includes a wealth of centuries-old signs and experiences, which survive in several forms: weaving of the agricultural fields, terracing, ancient working and cultivation techniques and buildings. They are, as a whole, the complex palimpsest of the cultural values of the community (Fig. I-3.13).

Agricultural activities are mostly concentrated in the areas of Bënjë and Kosinë, which possess a rich hydrographic network and geo-pedological conditions that have contributed to the development of a thriving agriculture.

The village of Bënjë is a significant testimony to the link between agricultural landscape and forms of community organisation. There are two agricultural areas here:

1. The slopes of the hills along the Rruga e Bënjës road, and
2. The valley of the Lengarica River, which due to the features of the soil and to their orientation are the most suitable for the development of an agricultural economy.



Figure I-3.12 – Above: The *Mulliri i Drithit* in a period photo [Courtesy: NICH]. Below: The mill today.

⁷ Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture of 08.01.1977.

⁸ The Ministry of Culture, with Decree no. 182 of 06.05.2015, declared the mill, category I Cultural Monument.

There is not a real agricultural system in the hilly areas at present. Part of them are used for the cultivation of valuable products (especially fruit trees, such as walnuts, plums, figs, pomegranates, mulberries and grapevines), while those closer to the village give rise to a minute network of vegetable gardens distributed on the terracing that affect the shape of the settlement system.

Vegetable gardens express the everyday rural dimension of the village and are fundamental elements of the morphology of the built environment. Generally enclosed by dry stone walls, they mark the boundaries of the property and also serve as buffers between domestic space and open agricultural areas. These elements are greatly rooted in the dwelling culture of all villages in the area of Përmet.

Terracing is also linked to the cultivation of olives, probably since the second half of the 18th century, when it was brought by people who migrated from Lëkurës (Sarandë).

The landscape of the grapevine, which has been cultivated since the foundation of the village, is quite different. According to Kola (2002), the ancient vineyards, divided into plots of land for every family, were located next to the wheat threshing floor (*lëm*) of the Naskovë family and on the two sections of the main road that descends to the Bënjë Bridge.

Wine-growing landscapes are the result of the varieties cultivated and have generated different forms depending on the type of grapevine. The prevailing cultivation system is the pergola (*hardhi me pjergulla*) (Fig. 1-3.14). The pergola grapevine was cultivated in Rrepe, Thermë, Tajmat, on the road that leads to the *Mulliri i Drithit*, but mostly in the courtyards of houses (Kola, 2002), to household, for decoration purposes and to protect the house from the summer sun. Pergola grapevines, widespread also in the dwellings of Kosinë and Leusë, are considered a 'relic' of the traditional grapevine landscape that continues to be preserved and handed down from generation to generation.



Figure I-3.13
Terraced vegetable
garden in Leusë.



Figure I-3.14
Kosinë. A
courtyard covered
with grape pergola.

The soil and climatic features of the area have also privileged the cultivation of white mulberry and the breeding of silkworms (a tradition now lost) by some farming families from the village that produced silk yarn or exported the silkworms to other regions in Albania (Kola, 2002).

The agricultural landscape along the Lengarica Valley is connoted, instead, by a network of fields that are distributed in regular geometric shapes and comprise mostly with arable land with or without trees.

Benjë was renowned for the cultivation of spring onions (traded since the early 20th century in the area of Përmet, but also in Gjirokastër, Skrapar, Berat and Korça), corn and several varieties of cereals. According to Kola (2002), wheat cultivation dates back to remote times as witnessed by the presence of four threshing floors (*lëm*) in the village. The construction of threshing floors was widespread throughout Albania. From the 17th century onward, with the dissemination of corn which had become a primary source of livelihood, the use of threshing floors was progressively reduced (Muka, 2007). The threshing floor was usually made in a ventilated area. It had a circular shape, with a diameter of approximately 3-6 metres, perfectly levelled and paved with slabs of stone. Horses or mules, tied with a rope to a central post known as *strumbullar*, moved according to the circular perimeter and crushed the spikes, thus freeing the grains from their husks. The last phases of the productive cycle consisted in husking and transporting the clean wheat to the *Mulliri i Drithit* for grinding. The threshing floor was considered as a sacred space – in the same way as the cemetery was – and where building was forbidden. Paradoxically, this belief contributed to safeguard these spaces and to preserve a testimony of great historical value, not only in Bënjë, but also in numerous rural contexts in Albania (Muka, 2007).

The area of Kosinë, unlike that of Bënjë, shows a rural agricultural landscape that has evolved through time, partially losing its original features. Over the past

few years, the growth of the village and the transition from subsistence agriculture to increasingly intensive forms of agricultural practices is producing a sudden loss of cultural values and of the traditions that have been built up over time. Kosinë is in close relationship to the Vjosa and to the tributaries of the Lemnica, which have favoured a greater agricultural productivity. As in Bënjë, also at Kosinë the agricultural landscape can be divided into two types. The first is featured by a hilly landscape with a network of irregularly shaped fields, which, together with the dense mosaic of vegetable gardens, is the ancient agricultural fabric where high-value crops (walnuts, plums, figs, pomegranate, black and white mulberry, grapes) and vegetables are grown. The second is featured by an agricultural layout of open fields with regular geometric shapes situated along the Vjosa Valley. Here the soil and environmental



Figure I-3.15
The agricultural
landscape of the
Vjosa Valley near
Kosinë.



Figure 1-3.16
A flock of sheep
in the environs of
Leusë.

conditions have favoured the production of fodder and cereals such as wheat, hulled wheat, corn, rye and barley (Fig. I-3.15).

In Leusë, the geo-pedologic conditions and the steep slopes have affected agricultural activities, which are limited to scarce arable surfaces.

The quality of the landscape of Përmet is also linked to the practice of high-altitude transhumance shepherdry, to which the numerous alpine pastures bear witness (Fig. I-3.16). In the region of Gjirokaštër the main places where this periodical migration takes place are the range of Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë (in the summer) and the mountains of Sarandë (in the winter), which connect directly with the Pindus mountain range in Greece (Sorotou, 2014). As in other rural Albanian areas, the migration of the younger and active sectors of the population resulted finally in a decline of transhumance. This ancient shepherdry practice is, however, an important factor in the history of the region and a tradition that contributed to the formation of its agro-sylvo-pastoral landscape. As a result, it should be rediscovered and enhanced also with tourism-oriented purposes. Of the three villages studied, transhumance is still practiced only in Leusë.

The trail network

In the landscape system, the historical routes such as trails, mule tracks or sheep-tracks play a key role (Fig. I-3.17). In the Gjirokaštër Region this network of walkways has historically determined the development between communities and places and has recently become an attractive factor for promoting tourism. According to CESVI (2017-2018), in the vast area of Përmet, every year there is an increase in demand for tourism and hiking. Unfortunately, however, this valuable heritage is not reaching its full potential.



Figure 1-3.17
A detail of the path connecting the village of Bënjë with the Katiu Bridge.

In the region, the issue of the trail network is sporadically addressed by associations operating in the area or by ministerial entities that, however, mostly limit their activities to the promotion of hiking trails.

Due to a lack of a single entity responsible for the trail network management, the actions on an operative, administrative, organisational, and normative level are uncoordinated. In order to enhance the trail network, it would be necessary: (1) to complete the survey of the paths⁹, (2) to collect them in a single database, and (3) to implement a platform for the management of geo-referenced contents. This also applies to network of transhumance trails, which has no official recognition and is not supported by historical references.

In order to promote the knowledge of the environmental, landscape and historical-cultural heritage of Përmet, a regional *Greenway System* can be an effective strategic tool for fostering forms of experiential, outdoor and eco-sustainable tourism that may also counteract the abandonment of the rural areas.

Critical issues and future prospects

To this day, the State considers as worth of safeguarding – through specific regulations – only “individual amenities”, groups of elements (monuments) and complexes, protected historical sites (for instance, the historical centre of Bënjë), as well as “landscape-environmental excellences” in which case the national legislation envisages the institution of nature parks. The safeguarding of the landscape is pursued in fact only in the territory of Bënjë, since it is located within the “Bredhi i Hotovës – Dangëlli” National Park, and only in reference to natural monuments¹⁰.

For this reason, it is necessary to activate a new nationwide process of landscape planning to produce adequate tools at a regional scale capable of regulating landscape in its entirety and of contextually recognizing its intrinsic value. This process is not self-evident since, both at the institutional and community levels, the degree of sensitivity toward landscape themes and values is extremely low and a scarce awareness and recognition of its true cultural value prevails.

This fact, further confirmed by field trips and interviews, also results in the absence of substantive projects concerning the landscape enhancement. It is therefore necessary to build a culture of the landscape based on actions that put in place new instruments and projects, capable of initiating social interaction mechanisms (see Morisi *et al.*, 2018) and synergic educational and awareness processes among councilors, inhabitants and professionals.

⁹ A similar initiative has been promoted by ministerial entities, which have partially recorded hiking trails (only some of which have been surveyed) in the National Map of Hiking Trails, published in the form of WebGIS. (See: <<http://tourism.albinfo.al/>>). The map includes biking and hiking trails along the valley of the Vjosa and the Lemnica Rivers, and a hiking trail near the Lengarica River.

¹⁰ In 2018 the Albanian government approved Act 27/2018 “Concerning cultural heritage and museums” which in its Fourth Section regulates “The cultural landscape heritage”, understood as “part of the territory which has historical, cultural, natural, morphological and aesthetic interest and whose features were modelled by the action of natural and/or human factors, as well as by their interaction” (art. 5). The Act provides for, among other things, the institution of the National Landscape Plan (art. 245). To this day, however, the procedure for its drafting has not begun.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Training of new professional figures and creation of competencies at the institutional level aimed at regional landscape planning

The aim of the Action is to train professionals – operating both within and outside of the public administration at the municipal level – capable of analysing and understanding the landscape in inter-disciplinary terms, as well as of drafting and implementing planning tools (urban and landscape planning).

This Action requires two types of measures:

- Organisation of refresher courses for public administration personnel concerning the safeguarding and regulation of the landscape and the respective responsibilities of the entities involved;
- Institution of university degree or postgraduate masters aimed at providing and building general and specific knowledge, as well as theoretical and professional competencies concerning the issue of the safeguarding and enhancement of the landscape.

A.2 Promoting educational projects concerning the landscape and the environment

This Action is aimed at promoting educational projects (lessons, seminars, workshops) on the landscape and environment issues through special training programmes for teachers and students of the primary school in Kosinë and of the schools in Përmet. The Action should also provide information campaigns aimed at increasing the awareness of the local community towards environmental and landscape values^(a).

This Action, potentially replicable in all the schools of the Gjirokastër Region, needs a strong support from institutions and universities, as well as the collaboration of local guides and of the NGOs present in the area, which together should:

- Provide support to teachers in the design of the activities, supplying them with materials for landscape investigation and interpretation, and helping them to organise initiatives that personally involve the students;
- Promote practices aimed at the enhancement and safeguarding of the landscape/environmental heritage of the region;
- Foster a sense of belonging vis-à-vis the historical and cultural values of the local landscape.

S2 Planning Strategies

A.3 Drafting of the Landscape Plan for the Gjirokastër Region

This Action proposes the drafting of the *Landscape Plan* for the Gjirokastër Region, understood as the main governance tool, which combines the socio-economic development model of the Region with the need to safeguard the landscape and identity related resources of the area.

The Landscape Plan should be conceived as an “implementing planning tool” of the National Landscape Plan (L. 27/2018, art. 245) in interaction with other land-use planning tools, at different scales and in various sectors. It must not only be the result of an administrative, political and institutional process, but also a product, enhanced by scientific work, which generates knowledge through analysis, field observation and social interaction.

For the purposes of drafting the Plan it is also necessary to strengthen/update/adapt the information technology resources for landscape planning and to create a regional geographic information system that manages and implements the basic geographic information (cartography), which is currently lacking. For this end, the infrastructure of geographical data, managed by the Gjirokastër Region, should communicate and coordinate with the National Authority for Geographic Information (ASIG).

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.4 Drafting of the Landscape Atlas for Përmet

The Action aims at producing a *Landscape Atlas* as a contribution to the knowledge of the landscape that highlights its features, form and history, as well as the use and the state of places.

The interpretation of the landscape for the purposes of the Atlas can follow the best-known analysis methodologies as applied to different international contexts^(b). The Atlas can provide support, in terms of knowledge, in the drafting of landscape planning tools and interact with the Community Maps referred to in Action A.5.

The digital version of the Atlas could be put on the website of the Municipality of Përmet, also with the purpose of offering the local population, visitors and scholars alike, the possibility of suggesting improvements or changes.

A.5 Drafting of the Community Map of the villages of Përmet

A *Community Map*^(e) is a participatory tool aimed at the self-knowledge and self-representation of the inhabitants in their inhabited space. It is a symbolic representation of a place through weak formalisation techniques (drawing, photography, collage, narrative, other graphic or cartographic materials, etc.). It originates from the active mobilisation of groups of inhabitants, especially the elderly, artists, local historians and students. The participatory process can be structured in various phases (interviews, public meetings, workshops, public debates etc.) and managed by specifically trained facilitators supported by NGOs, the local administration, universities and research centres.

The aim is to acquire the cultural, environmental, landscape and productive heritage values recognised by the inhabitants of the villages, recording identity-related values which are disappearing (due to endogenous and exogenous causes) and thus provide a fundamental contribution to scientific studies as well.

Community Maps could become support tools regarding the knowledge frameworks of the General Town Plan of Përmet (see Bashkia Përmet, 2020), defining the “structural invariants” (now absent) and the strategic forecasts. The maps could initiate a new phase of governance based on the ‘social construction’ of the Plan.

Some of their contents could be used as narrative elements in the descriptions of places, placed on information panels in the most significant spots in the villages.

In the case of Përmet, one could begin with the production of the *Community maps* for Bënjë, Kosinë and Leusë as a ‘pilot experience’ to then replicate in other villages of the Municipality.

A.6 Recognition of transhumance as the historical essence and intangible heritage of the Gjirokaštër Region

The Action aims to initiate an inter-disciplinary research project that inquires into the phenomenon of transhumance from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective^(d). The goal is to offer a scientific contribution regarding a topic, which currently does not have enough historiographical sources.

The project, proposed for the sample area of Gjirokaštër (to be replicated perhaps at the national scale), should:

- Analyse the phenomenon of transhumance from a historical perspective, reconstructing a fundamental element in the rural history and landscape formation of the region;
 - Promote the case comparison and exchange of information with international networks and partners;
 - Offer opportunities for the enhancement of the trails and for the local communities to recognise the important role that transhumance has historically played in the region.
-

A.7 Creating a Digital Hiking Trail Inventory

The Action aims to create a Digital Hiking Trail Inventory starting from the existing regional network of hiking and transhumance.

It is divided into two parts:

1. Survey the hiking, transhumance trails and all existing trail infrastructures (shelters and other types of facilities) and record them in a geo database using GIS technologies. The primary information source for the *Hiking Trail Inventory* is the National Hiking Map^(e); other information must be acquired on site.
2. Create a *Digital Hiking Trail Inventory*^(f).

This Inventory should provide the following information on each trail:

- Identification number or name of the trail;
 - Area of reference to which it belongs and local entities involved;
 - Map references;
 - Altitudes reached by the path;
 - Hiking times;
 - Classification of trails based on their level of difficulty;
 - Association/Entity in charge of management/maintenance (see A.15);
 - Points of interest (cultural and environmental, as well as springs, restaurants and refreshment areas, bird hides, etc.).
-

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.8 Drafting a project for the environmental regeneration of the thermal area surrounding Katiu Bridge

The environmental regeneration project of the thermal area must aim at improving the landscape quality of the place and increasing the services in support of the thermal activities.

Specific works (in accordance with the guidelines of the Management Plan for the “Bredhi i Hotovës – Dangëlli” National Park) should concern:

IMPROVING VEHICULAR ACCESS TO THE THERMAL AREA

The current access to the thermal area consists of a road that is partly asphalted and partly unpaved. For safety reasons it is necessary to repair any uneven sections of the dirt road.

CONSTRUCTION OF A PARKING AREA

The parking area should be located in an unobtrusive spot not far from the bridge in order to avoid discomfort for people with mobility difficulties. The site should be predominantly flat and adequately shaded and shielded through the planting of autochthonous plants and shrubs.

In addition to a parking area it is necessary to provide some car spaces for the vehicles of disabled visitors, personnel in charge of the management and control of the thermal area as well as fire and rescue personnel.

REPAIR OF PEDESTRIAN PATHS

The sections which are more uneven and difficult to travel need to be improved using, when possible, natural materials (such as wooden slats, stone slabs, etc.). The construction of paths equipped with safety and support systems (such as handrails or upstands at open edges of a path) has the purpose of making the area more accessible and ensuring greater safety for all visitors.

CREATION OF PICNIC AREAS

Due to the great number of visitors to the thermal area in spring and summer, it is advisable to provide for rest areas with tables, seats, rubbish bins, etc., adequately shaded for visitors and hikers who use the spot as a starting point for their hikes in the surrounding mountains.

CREATION OF A LOCAL PRODUCTS MARKETPLACE.

Along the approach path to the bridge, it might be useful to provide for small sales areas, where farmers, shepherds or simple inhabitants of the area could sell local products to tourists to improve incomes.

CONSTRUCTION OF AN EQUIPPED CAMPGROUND

A small campground equipped with services such as a refreshment area, changing room, showers and toilets at an adequate distance from the bridge should be provided for. The structures should be reversible and built with materials conforming to environmental sustainability criteria. The refreshment area could be easily used in order to offer day tourists the possibility to have a meal in a comfortable and well-equipped environment. The campground, in addition to providing a service to tourists, would also create job opportunities for the inhabitants of the area.

MAKE THE ACCESSIBILITY TO THE THERMAL BATHS SAFE

Katiu Bridge is lacking a parapet. To prevent falls but also to ensure greater comfort conditions for those suffering from vertigo, a protection device at the sides of the roadway would be necessary. It must integrate harmoniously with the bridge, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the existing structure. Moreover, it should be built taking into account the principles of minimum visual impact and reversibility.

Should this solution be considered too invasive, the possibility of a floating gangway may be envisaged. It should be used only during the months of the highest affluence of tourists in the thermal area (from May to October), removed during the winter months (in order to prevent damage caused by the overflow of the river) and adequately stored in a designated place. It is therefore necessary to build it with elements easy to assemble and store.

IMPROVEMENT WORK ON THE THERMAL BATHS

The baths do not currently present the minimum necessary safety features, such as, for example, steps for entering and exiting, handrails, anti-slip strips and support elements. With a targeted design, the necessary adaptations could be made without excessively altering the current appearance and layout. Furthermore, the idea of constructing stone seats near the baths could be considered, so as to offer support and greater comfort to users. Environmentally friendly solutions to expand the area of the thermal baths during the summer would be desirable.

DRAFTING A COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SYSTEM

Provide the thermal area with an adequate information and communication system that offers information to visitors concerning the main natural and historical features of the area and places of landscape interest, including signage for hiking trails and trail maps with all the necessary information for safely exploring the region.

Informative contents could also be provided through QR codes.

SET-UP OF LIGHTING INSTALLATION IN THE AREA

Establish an adequate lighting system in the area (currently entirely lacking) to allow the use of the thermal baths in safety even during the night. The lighting installation should be limited to strategic places (pathways, points of greater danger, thermal baths, etc.) and must adopt solutions that ensure minimum environmental impact and preserve the suggestive atmosphere of the place.

Since the thermal area is not equipped with electricity, we propose a system which combines photovoltaic panels and LED lamps.

WASTE WATER DISPOSAL

The disposal of secondary waste water produced in the area could take place through phytodepuration, a natural purification process that uses bacteria and plants present in the soil and in the water as active biological filters capable of reducing the pollutants present in the waste water.

All the listed measures should be based upon landscape continuity criteria in terms of form, colour, materials, building techniques, volumetric ratio. It is specifically recommended not to modify the existing vegetation features (through the felling of trees and the elimination of riparian formations), but rather to enhance them by adding new autochthonous plant species. It is also necessary to maintain the skyline and the same perceptive, scenic and panoramic appearance of the place, as well as the existing visual relationships.

For a project based on the measures envisaged in this Action, see Figs. I-3.18 and I-3.19.

A.9 Restoration of the Mulliri i Drithit for the stone-grinding of flours produced with local grains and the establishment of a short supply chain

A.9.1 Restoration of the Mulliri i Drithit and landscape redevelopment of the context

The Action aims to initiate the reconstruction of *Mulliri i Dridhit* (literally “cereal mill”), returning it to the original function of stone-grinding cereals, thus fostering the recovery of the tradition of producing ancient flours and cereals, which has been lost.

For this purpose, it would be necessary to accurately reconstruct the entire building, which includes the grinding area and the *dërstilë* room, re-build the machinery and finally repair the hydraulic system in order for the grinding system to be fully functional.

Prior to the restoration work it is necessary to carry out a knowledge process based on two phases:

- Architectural survey of the mill (possibly through digital technologies such as laser scanner and photogrammetry) to fully understand and assess the current state of the structure;
- Historical analysis of the building to obtain in-depth knowledge of its history, the events surrounding it, its role in the community, as well as the machinery and grinding processes.

Restoration works should be carried out simultaneously with the measures aimed at the improvement of the landscape quality of the place and at the redevelopment of the surrounding areas, in other words:

- Repair the vehicular access route required for productive purposes;
- Build a small car park for the staff in an unobtrusive location;
- Repair the pedestrian pathway (including signage and lighting) as a section of the existing hiking trails;
- Rehabilitate the open spaces, recovering their original functional-landscape appearance and their relationship to the river;
- Provide an adequate information and communication system that explains the history of the mill, so as to disseminate knowledge about the place and its historical value;
- Build spaces devoted to community-related events (e.g. *Harvest Feast in Bënjë*, A7, chap. I.2) and to the promotion of tourism in the area so as to preserve the original function of the mill as a place of social interaction. Works for equipping the outdoor area should include light and low-impact removable structures, and provide for the use of natural materials that are compatible with the fluvial ecosystem processed by local craftsmen (see chap. I.2).

In order to carry out a proper landscape redevelopment, the following should be considered: (1) undertake a preliminary analysis of the context, (2) determine the parameters for the interpretation of landscape qualities and criticalities, and (3) base the works on landscape continuity criteria regarding the context of the Lengarica River.

It is specifically recommended not to modify the existing vegetal structure (through the felling of trees and the elimination of riparian formations), but rather to enhance it with the addition of new autochthonous plant species.

A.9.2 Creation of a short supply chain for cereals to be ground in the *Mulliri i Drithit*⁽⁸⁾

Following the reconstruction of the mill and its return to original function of stone-grinding cereals, we propose the creation of a short supply chain, which begins with the cultivation of cereals and culminates in the retail sale of products. Prior to this it is necessary to carry out research aimed at surveying the varieties of local cereals and ancient grains used in the past. If the recovery of the original function were not possible due to the lack of waterflow of the Lengarica River, we suggest resorting to an alternative system to make it work.

Management of the mill and of the supply chain itself could be entrusted to a community cooperative (or to a social enterprise), with the purpose of favouring the involvement of farmers, inhabitants of the village, food merchants and local restaurant owners (see Mori & Sforzi, 2018). This type of management can generate synergy and cohesion, help organise the necessary figures and activities and respond to the various needs of reciprocity.

The *Mulliri i Drithit* can also be the centre of educational projects related to it involving local history, architecture, food science, milling and cereal grinding techniques, etc. Once it starts functioning, it would offer great teaching opportunities due to the simultaneous presence of hydraulic and mechanic phenomena and traditional food production activities. It is well suited to become an educational workshop.

A.10 Promoting the cultural and recreational enhancement of the Lengarica Canyon: iron paths and caves

The Action aims at establishing a sport climbing route, equipped with metal cables, stepladders and other anchors fixed to the rock walls, with a starting point in the area of the thermal baths of Bënjë and arriving to the opposite side of the canyon.

Along the canyon there is a vast system of karstic caves, some connected between them by tunnels (Saliu, 2011). The iron paths can also provide an opportunity to enhance caves such as that of Katiu and of Pëllumbave, spaces that could exhibit copies of the objects found during the archaeological expedition of 1978.

Due to the height of the rock walls, the landscape and the eco-systemic balance of the Lengarica River, the following preventive measures should be considered:

- Limit the impact of the works;
- Carry out a preventive analysis for assessing the geological risks related to undertaking the works;
- Undertake a technical analysis for choosing materials according to their chemical and physical features and to the properties of the rock walls;
- Determine a monitoring plan for the canyon.

A.11 Enhancing the main panoramas over the Valley of the Lengarica and the scenic views of the villages

This Action leverages on the open-air viewpoints that offer scenic vistas from which to contemplate the rural landscape and the places of cultural interest. The most important of these are the views over the three villages, the area of the canyon and of the thermal baths of Bënjë.

SCENIC VIEWPOINTS EQUIPPED WITH FACILITIES

In the scenic spots of the villages of Bënjë and Leusë and along the paths, there are viewpoints that offer a vast variety of visual attractions (ridges, forests, peaks, mountain passes, river valleys etc.). These natural panoramas are the ideal places for creating equipped viewpoints. For the completion of the necessary works (rest areas, railings, paving, etc.), we suggest the use of local materials and to entrust local craftsmen with their construction. Providing the viewpoints with informative panels including QR codes describing the flora and fauna, history and cultural heritage of the area is also recommended. The creation of equipped scenic viewpoints can be proposed also in Kosinë, both for the area of the Church of the Dormition of Mary that looks over the valley of the Vjosa River and the 'cistern hill', to the west of the new quarter of the village (see chap. I.4).

Two religious buildings used to stand on the top of the 'cistern hill', a small church and a *teqe*, which were demolished during the Communist period and replaced with bunkers. The site is still important to the community of Kosinë, as can be seen by the presence of a cross, a clear symbol of its past religious function.

We propose for its enhancement the following works:

- Site-specific art installations (sculptures or art installations, both permanent and temporary) to celebrate the memory of the place;

- Reconversion of the bunkers into ‘places of memory’. In this case, the suggestion is to demolish the above-ground section of the bunkers and to reconstruct the outline of the destroyed religious buildings, leaving them as symbolic traces of a past that is still alive in the memory of the inhabitants. The subterranean part of the bunkers, instead, could be used as an exhibition centre for narrating the history of the place through written documents, photographs and testimonials of the inhabitants^(h).

THE THERMAL BATHS AND THE CANYON OF THE LENGARICA RIVER

Build a scenic terrace in a place with a remarkable view that enhances the scenery of the springs and the Katiu Bridge. Prior to choosing the location for the terrace, it is advisable to carry out a detailed analysis of the viewpoints, the morphological features of the terrain and the feasibility of building or repairing a pedestrian pathway that makes it easily accessible from the thermal baths.

A.12 Restoration of the Bënjë Bridge

See A.1-A3, sect. I.5.1.

A.13 Enhancing the trail network

This Action aims to promote the natural, landscape and cultural heritage and fosters eco-compatible forms of tourism in the Gjirokastër Region through the hiking and transhumance trails.

It requires a process of recognition and enhancement including the following specific elements:

- Usability improvement of trails through works of adjustment with a low environmental impact;
- Visibility improvement of trails with appropriate signage and panels;
- Restoration of existing constructions along the trail (retaining and boundary walls, fountains, bridges, mountain huts, shelters and so on);
- Foster tourism-related usability through the construction of equipped rest areas, refreshment areas, infrastructures for equestrian tourism and hiking;
- Tourist promotion of the trails through the organization of events connected to the food heritage of the pastoral tradition (see A.7, chap. I.1).

In order to provide guidance for the implementation of this Action it may be useful to develop a handbook including the guidelines for the design, construction and maintenance of the trails, as well as of any relative collateral works⁽ⁱ⁾.

A.14 Creating a Greenway System^(j)

This Action is aimed at creating a *Greenway System*, understood as an environmental, tourism-recreational and educational tool. It is designed to achieve the following purposes: (1) enhancing the extraordinary landscape variety of the area of Përmet, (2) fostering the knowledge of nature and respect for the environment, and (3) promoting active, responsible and sustainable forms of tourism.

In order to implement the Greenway System it is fundamental to invest in soft mobility through effective projects that enhance the entire network of paths, trails, gravel or dirt roads and water trails (such as the Vjosa, Lemnica and Lengarica Rivers) with various types of mobility (on foot, by boat, using pack animals, or other non-motorised forms of transport).

Following the model of international experiences, we suggest to activate thematic tourist routes, developed as projects for enhancing the usage, connectivity and permeability of the landscape, such as, for example:

- *The Bio-Bicycle Trails* project, with cycling paths added to the existing ones, extending also inside the Bredhi i Hotovës National Park^(k);
- *The Ancient Transhumance Trails* project, aimed at recovering the ancient pastoral trails and in particular the Përmet-Sarandë trail, as well as those of the Trebeshinë-Nëmërckë-Dhëmbel mountain range. This project can take advantage of the research proposed in Actions A.6 and A.7 and foster numerous events related to shepherding and the sampling of typical products (see A.7, chap. I.1)^(l);
- *The Paths of Culture and Religion* project (to be integrated with the “Rrugët e Besimit” one – The Routes of Faith – promoted by the National Institute of Cultural Heritage), with routes that lead to the most valuable cultural sites in the area;
- *The Trails of Biodiversity* project, which uses the existing trails in order to introduce visitors to knowledge and interest in the field of botany, to the natural habitats and high biodiversity of the Vjosa, Lemnica and Lengarica Rivers and of the Bredhi i Hotovës National Park;
- *The Trails of Water* project, aimed at the enhancement of Vjosa, Lemnica and Lengarica Rivers and of the hydraulic infrastructures that still exist^(m).

Përmet is an ideal place for testing this approach. The first elements for setting the foundations of a Greenway System could be: (1) the Lengarica Blueway together with the thermal area (A.8, A10), (2) the Lëuse-Përmet road (see A.2, sect. I.4.3), (3) the Lengarica-Bënjë trail (see A.9, sect. I.4.1), and (4) the horse trail that starts in Kosinë (see A.11, sect. I.4.2). Prior to carrying out this Action, it is necessary to undertake a territorial-landscape analysis of the whole municipal context and to establish strong cohesion and cooperation among the various local development stakeholders.

S7 Management Strategies

A.15 Entrusting the management of the hiking network of Përmet to a single entity

The Albanian national context lacks an institutional or associative structure devoted to the management of hiking trails. This obviously also applies to mountainous areas where operate the Albanian Federation for Mountain-Climbing and Mountain Tourism (Federata Shqiptare e Alpinizmit dhe Turizmit Malor), as well as various local associations.

In the specific case of Përmet there is the Mountain-Climbing and Tourism Association of Përmet (Shoqata e Alpinizmit dhe e Turizmit Malor Përmet), which could be entrusted with the promotion and maintenance of the hiking network of the Municipality, following the model of the Club Alpino Italiano (CAI).

Notes

- a) See “Il paesaggio dell’Alpe” educational project, promoted by the Fondo Ambiente Italiano (FAI) (<<http://www.fondoambiente.it/il-fai/scuola/progetti-fai-scuola/educazione-ambientale/>>).
- b) Regarding the method for drafting a Landscape Atlas see Ghersi & Mazzino (2003). See also the Piano di Indirizzo Territoriale con valenza di Piano Paesaggistico della Regione Toscana (<<https://www.paesaggiotoscana.it/piano-paesaggistico>>).
- c) Regarding the method for drafting Community Maps, refer to the experiences of the Parish Map in Great Britain. Refer, as well, to “territorial statute” of the Municipality of Montespertoli (Magnaghi, 2010) and to the experimental projects undertaken as part of the Progetto Integrato al Piano Paesaggistico della Regione Puglia. See <http://www.paesaggio.regione.puglia.it/PPTR_2015/4_Lo%20scenario%20strategico/4.3_progetti%20integrati%20di%20paesaggio%20sperimentali.pdf>.
- d) See “Transumanza e Territorio in Toscana (TRATTO): percorsi e pascoli dalla Protostoria all’Età Contemporanea” research project (Pizziolo *et al.*, 2017).
- e) See <<http://tourism.albinfo.al/>>.
- f) See: (1) “Linee guida per la formazione della Carta inventario dei percorsi escursionistici della Regione Liguria” (<http://www.ambienteinliguria.it/eco3/DTS_GENERALE/20110113/dgr1212_2010_linee_guida.pdf>), (2) “La valorizzazione del patrimonio escursionistico regionale” (<https://www.regione.piemonte.it/web/sites/default/files/media/documenti/2019-02/la_valorizzazione_del_patrimonio_escursionistico_regionale_ires.pdf>), and (3) Act no. 5 of 2017 of the Lombardy Regional Government (“Rete escursionistica della Lombardia”).
- g) Italian successful experiences to draw inspiration from could be the following: “Valsusa Mill” in the Municipality of Bruzolo (province of Turin) (see <<https://www.italiachecambia.org/2019/11/recupero-mulino-valsusa-rilancia-agricoltura-intera-valle/>>), as well as “Pransani Mill” in Sogliano al Rubicone (a Municipality located between Forlì and Cesena) (see <<https://www.italiachecambia.org/2017/05/io-faccio-cosi-168-mulino-recuperato-produce-farine-grani-antichi/>>).
- h) The suggestion is inspired by the project known as “Ghost Structures”, undertaken by Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown at Franklin Court in Philadelphia (1976). See: <<https://www.associationforpublicart.org/artwork/ghost-structures/>>. The possibility of carrying out works on the bunkers requires the prior agreement of the Ministry of Defense – which currently holds possession of these structures.
- i) See Manuale per la realizzazione dei sentieri (Basilicata Regional Government and Club Alpino Italiano) (<https://www.regione.basilicata.it/giunta/files/docs/DOCUMENT_FILE_2979249.pdf>).
- j) The project of the *greenway* – although in this case it concerns mainly the Municipality of Përmet – should be conceived as a project at the regional scale.
- k) A similar initiative was promoted by MiBACT and MIT through the project “Ciclovie” (see <<https://www.mit.gov.it/node/5383>>). See also the “Eurovelo” project, promoted by the *European Cyclist Federation* (<<https://ecf.com/>>).
- l) See <<http://www.leviedetratturi.com/progetto/>> and <<http://www.tratturomagno.it/tracturo3000>>.
- m) See <<https://www.bluwaysireland.org>> and other many initiatives undertaken with the collaboration of the *European Greenways Association* (<<https://www.aevv-egwa.org/#>>).

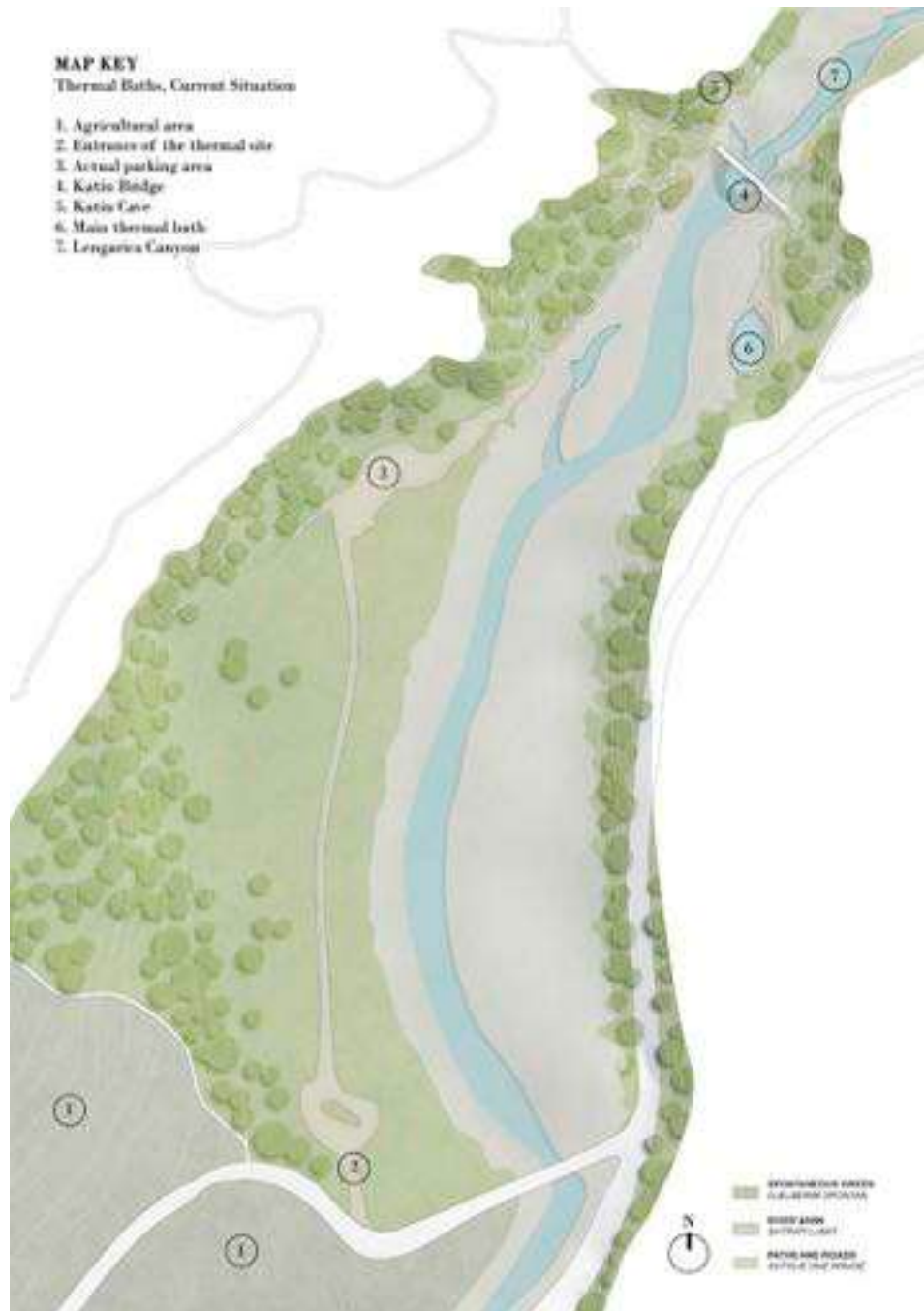
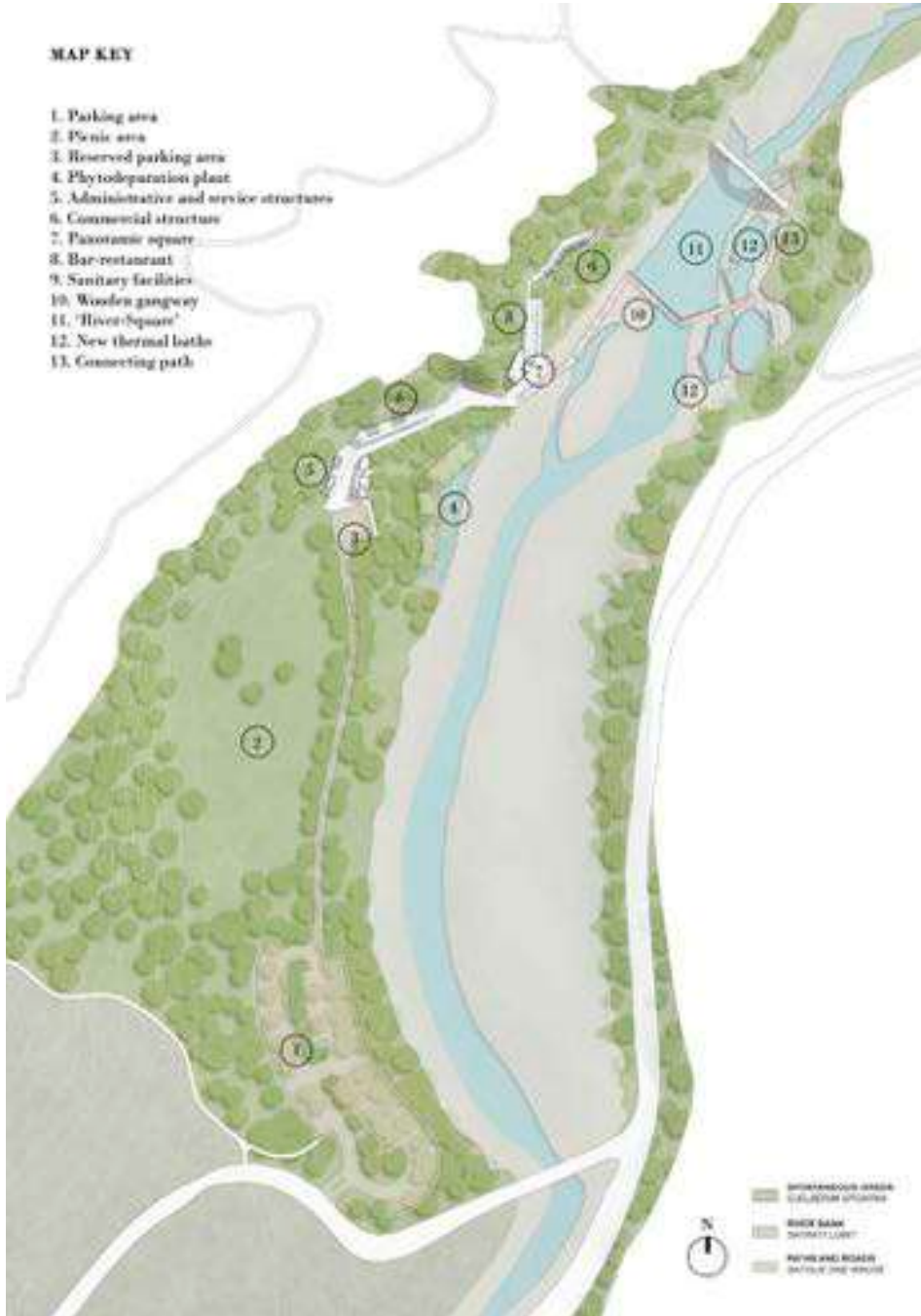


Figure I-3.18 – Redevelopment project of the thermal area in Bënjë. *Above*: Plan of the current situation. *Opposite page*: Masterplan of the project proposal. The project – designed by Dritan Kapo – aims to give new life to a multifunctional space by creating: new parking and picnic areas; a new scenic square; a wooden gangway across the river; new thermal pools; a phytoduration plant for treating the sewage; administrative, service and commercial facilities; sanitary facilities.



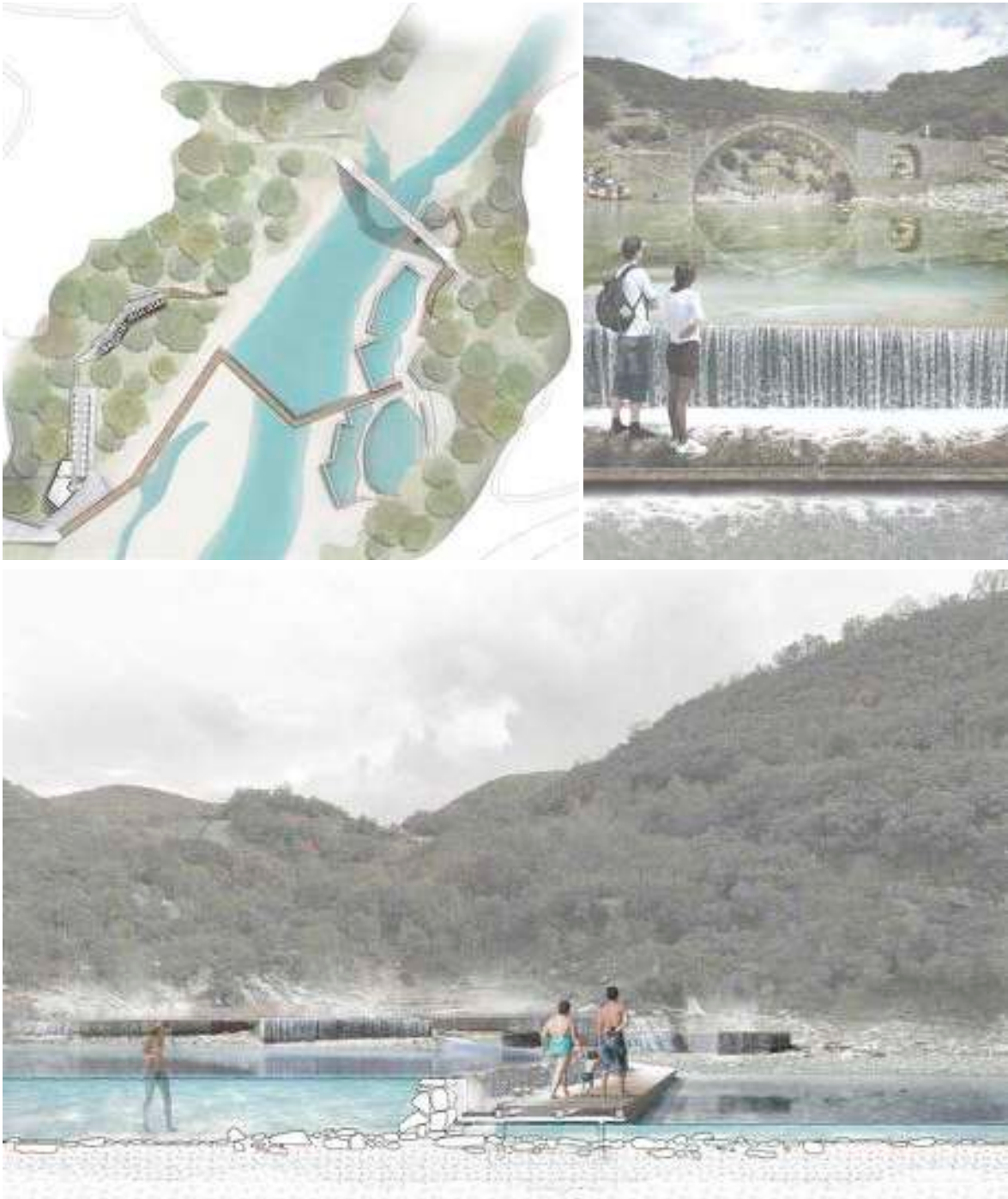


Figure 1-3.19 – Above, left: Plan of the project proposal for the thermal area in Bënjë. Above, right and Below: Renderings of the wooden gangway across the Lengarica River. A dry stone-wall (with a maximum height of 60 cm) allows the creation of a small dam which slows down the water flow, slightly raising the river level and, at the same time, creating an evocative reflection of the bridge on the water surface. The water that surpasses the stone barrier stimulates the senses and the emotional immersion in nature, through the sounds produced by the water and the refreshing droplets on the skin.

Settlements and buildings

SECTION I.4.1 – BËNJË

Historical overview

Traces of cave dwellings provide evidence of human presence in the area of Bënjë since the 3rd millennium B.C. (Kola, 2002; Saliu, 2011). According to Frashëri (1969), during the last few centuries before the Christian era the area was inhabited by the Illyrian tribe of the Parauej, which had settled along the banks of the River Vjosa and the adjacent territories (Dangëlli, Shqeri, Nemërçkë and Dhëmbel). An Ottoman fiscal registry (*defter*) dating back to the year 1431 mentions a hamlet with the name of “Bano” or “Bana” in the area where the village is now located (Buharaja, 2018). It is probably the ruined settlement, which lies on the hillock known as “Bregorja e Bërçeve” (Kola, 2002). The reasons that led the inhabitants to abandon the original location of Bënjë¹ are unknown, and there is no certain information concerning the date of foundation of the current village. The only available ‘documentation’ consists of the inscriptions on the cornerstones and entrances of dwellings, all dated between 1860 and 1910.

During this span of time, the South of Albania underwent substantial socio-economic changes, as well as wars and local conflicts (Mile, 1984). In this scenario the transformation of peasant houses into more complex configurations, similar to city dwellings, is frequent. Two-three storey fortified dwellings were built, sometimes giving rise to authentic fortified villages. (Muka, Riza & Thomo, 2004). The fortified

¹ According to Kola (2002) the inhabitants abandoned the original settlement due to the lack of water and the unfavourable characteristics of farmland.



Figure I-4.1.1
A traditional
fortified dwelling
in its landscape
background.

Figure I-4.1.2
Above: The village
of Bënjë in the
1930s. [Courtesy:
CESVI, Albania].
Below: Bënjë today.
A large part of the
settlement was
destroyed during
World War II.

houses of Bënjë, with aesthetic and typological features inspired on the stately homes of Gjirokaštër, belong to this phenomenon (Fig. I-4.1.1).

The destiny of Bënjë was permanently marked by World War II, when a large section of the village was destroyed. The amount of damage and the alteration of the original urban fabric can be seen by comparing the current state with a historical photograph from the Thirties (Fig. I-4.1.2).

With the fall of the Communist regime, the village, like many others in Albania, suffered an inexorable process of depopulation. It is currently inhabited by 80 people, most of whom are elderly; there are only 4 children in the village, all of whom go to school in Përmet.

The residential area

Bënjë is a settlement located on a slope with especially valuable landscape and architectural features, due to which it was granted recognition in 2016 as a “historic centre”².

The village is approximately 15 km from Përmet. The road (Rruga e Bënjës) is asphalted and in good condition until the turn that leads to the thermal area. From that point onward, it becomes a rather rugged dirt road with accessibility and safety issues, which worsen during the winter months. The bad condition of the road has a strong

² Decree of the Council of Ministers no. 776 of 02.11.2016



Figure I-4.1.3
The Church of St. Mary, surrounded by ornamental cypress trees, is a landmark located in a scenic point in the proximity of the entrance to the village.

impact on the quality of life of the community, since it contributes to the isolation of the village.

There are other communication routes, such as mule tracks and trails. Among these, one of the most interesting is the trail that begins near the Church of St. Mary (Fig. I-4.1.3), runs along the River of Bënjë, crosses it thanks to a bridge from the Ottoman period (*Ura e Bënjës*) and reaches the thermal area. Unfortunately, some sections of the trail are currently uneven (see Fig. I-3.17).

Benjë's road network includes a main street (*Guri i Konomit*) which crosses the entire village, and four local streets that branch off from it and follow the morphology of the slope. The streets, which were originally paved with the use of the local stone (*kall-drëm*), are in a state of disrepair and are only walkable.

The traditional dwellings

Typological features

Dwellings present L-shaped and rectangular layouts; in the past there were also two and three-storey dwellings with U and E-shaped layouts (Kola, 2002) (Figs. I-4.1.4 - I-4.1.6).

Dwellings are traditionally distributed around a small courtyard (*oborr*) enclosed by a wall; often groups of dwellings form a single building. The courtyard is accessed from the street through an entrance gate protected by a canopy. The courtyard serves both distributive and service functions, since it is used for carrying out domestic ac-

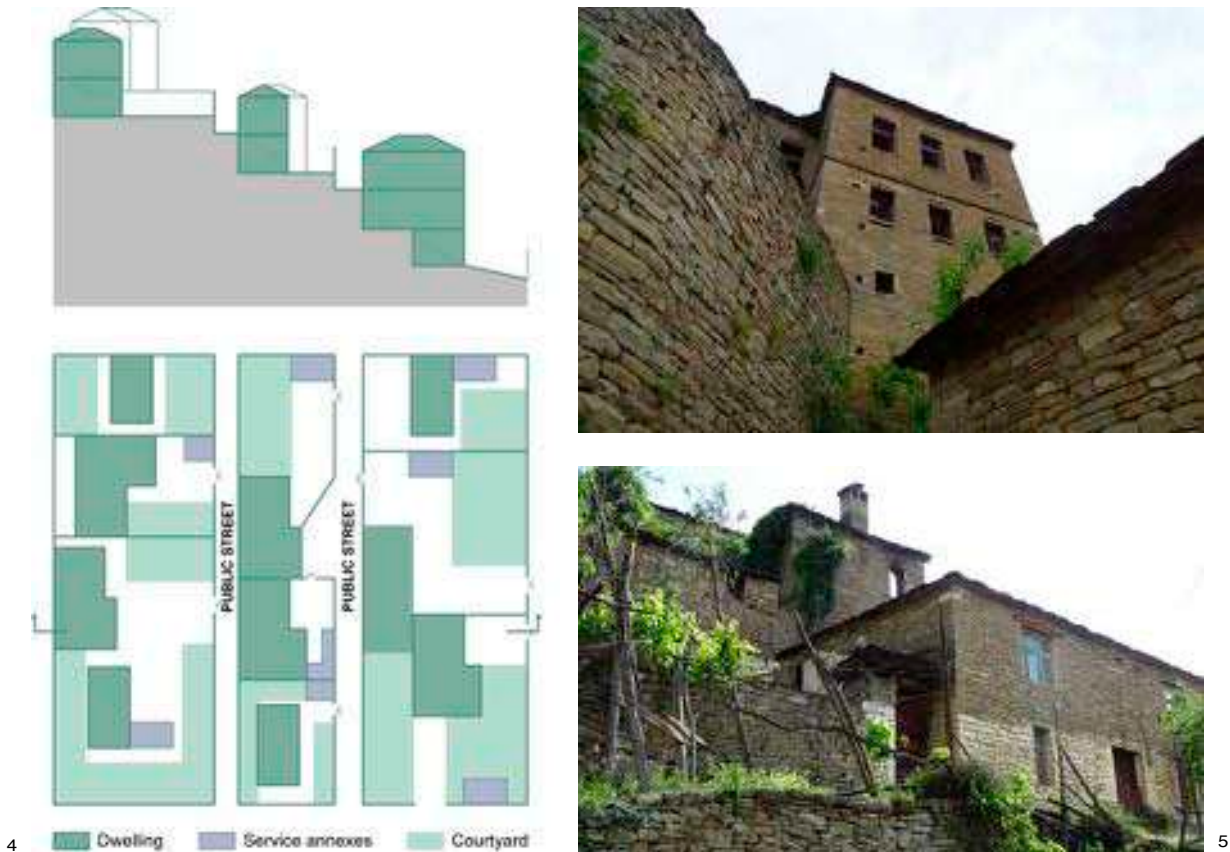


Figure I-4.1.4
The urban settlement pattern of Bënjë's historic centre. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

Figure I-4.1.5
Two dwelling typologies in the historic centre of Bënjë. Above, the Prifti house.

activities, but it also plays an aesthetic role by emphasising the entrance. In it are located the oven, toilets, chicken coop, beehives and agricultural annexes, an expression of the rural life of the village (Fig. I-4.1.7).

The ground floors of the dwellings originally included the food pantry, the harvest storeroom, the stables and troughs. With the passage of time, the function of these spaces changed: they have mostly been turned into habitable spaces, like the ones on the upper floors.

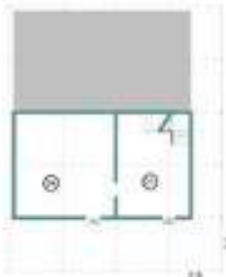
Houses usually have from three to ten rooms (in three-storey buildings). In the layout of the house, the main spaces were the room with the hearth (*shtëpia e zjarrit*) and the guest room (*oda e miqve*).

The *shtëpia e zjarrit* is the room that better represents the dimension of everyday life, since it is where food is prepared and eaten and where the family gathers, but it is also pregnant with symbolic values (Muka, 2007). The fire was always burning and its extinguishing was a sign of the coming of a period of bad fortune for the whole family. Occasionally this was the room where the head of the family slept.

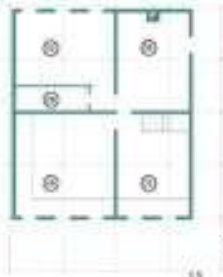
The *oda e miqve* was the reception room of the house.

It was exclusively for the use of men and for the main family rituals, such as wedding feasts and funerals (Muka, 2007). Important guests were received in this room, which was generally located on the uppermost floor and in a privileged position. The guests would also sleep there in case of prolonged stays. Great attention was given to the wooden ceilings, which in wealthier houses were abundantly decorated, as well as to the furniture, such as, for example, the *musëndra* (a typical cupboard) (Fig. I-4.1.8).

Original layout



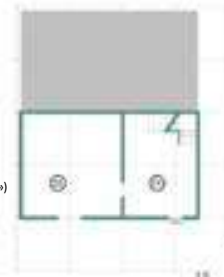
Semi-Basement Floor



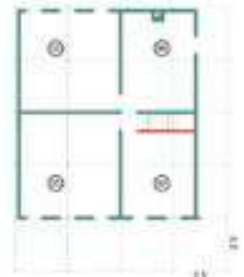
Ground Floor

- 01. entrance
- 02. bedroom
- 03. harvest storeroom
- 04. stables and troughs
- 05. guest room («koda e miqve»)
- 06. hearth room («shtëpia e zjarrit»)
- 07. Hallway and/or food storage room
- 08. storage closet

Transformed layout



Semi-Basement Floor

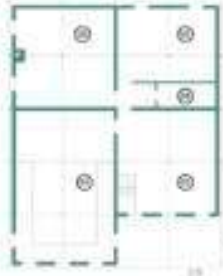


Ground Floor

Original layout



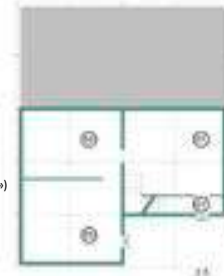
Semi-Basement Floor



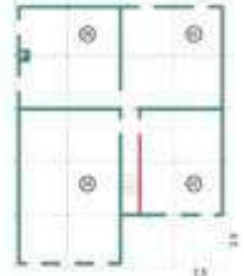
Ground Floor

- 01. entrance
- 02. bedroom
- 03. harvest storeroom
- 04. stables and troughs
- 05. guest room («koda e miqve»)
- 06. hearth room («shtëpia e zjarrit»)
- 07. Hallway and/or food storage room
- 08. storage closet

Transformed layout



Semi-Basement Floor



Ground Floor

6



7

Figure I-4.1.6 – Hypothesis on the original layout of the domestic space and transformations that occurred over time concerning two typologies of the historic centre of Bënjë. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

Figure I-4.1.7 – Beehives in a house courtyard of the village.



Figure I-4.1.8
A guest room
(*oda e miqve*) in
an abandoned
building of Bënjë.

Among the village dwellings whose original morpho-typological features are better preserved, it is worth mentioning the one belonging to the Prifti family (1868)³ (see Fig. I-4.1.5 above).

Building features and state of conservation

The village preserves some of its original features.

The vertical load-bearing structure is a three-leaf stone masonry with a rubble core. The exterior face is made of coursed ashlar blocks bound with lime mortar. Inside the wall there are often longitudinal timber elements (repeated at regular intervals in height) probably joined together with small timber transversal connectors. The wall structures are on the whole of good quality, although there are some executive defects are found (for example, inaccurate toothing between walls). External openings have timber or stone lintels, or else lintels and relieving arches in stone, and their size generally increases on the upper levels of the building (Figs. I-4.1.9 and I-4-1.10).

Intermediate floors are in timber. They have transverse bracing elements included in the thickness of the beams. The flooring usually consists of boarding directly hammered onto the beams. Ground floors usually have the same structure as the intermediate floors.

There are often false ceilings made of plastered reeds or timber planks (Fig. I-4.1.11).

Partitions are made with a timber frame with planks nailed onto it or with woven reeds.

³ This building was presented as a candidate for recognition as a category I Cultural Monument. To this day the request has not yet been accepted.

The roof is hipped. Its structure is often composed of trusses with rafters, tie beam and king post. The boarding is placed directly on the trusses and above it there is a covering made of dry-assembled stone slabs.

Enclosing and retaining walls are made with dry-assembled squared-off stone elements.

Overall, numerous constructions were found to be in bad conditions, and many are in a state of ruin. In general, there is severe damage to uninhabited buildings, which in many cases require the implementation of urgent safety measures in view of subsequent consolidation and restoration works. Many houses have collapsed roofs; water leaks have damaged and continue to inexorably damage the building. In some cases, there is rising damp from the ground and invasive shrub vegetation. Landslides and subsidence have brought about serious damage to the masonry, which is visible in most of the buildings in the village.

Public space

In the absence of real squares, the public life of the village takes place in the streets, open-air workplaces and at the Church of St. Mary, which dates back to the year 1873 (Kola, 2002). This religious building, which during the Communist regime served as a storehouse for grain and timber, was used not only for liturgical, but also for social purposes. Its portico (*hajat*), especially, was the place where the community met or gathered during secular ceremonies (Fig. I-4.1.12). The area in which it stands now in a state of neglect, includes a complex of open spaces, dirt roads and buildings, as well as the village school, which stopped functioning in 2017 due to the absence of students. Before the main entrance to the church, there is a small courtyard with a well and a gate, which serves as threshold to the exterior section (Fig. I-4.1.13).

In the past, the village streets were an important space for interaction; their margins offered sufficient space and opportunity for socialising. To the east of the settlement, at the crossroads, there is a clearing known as “Ndërgurë”, which was used by the men of the village as a meeting place (Kola, 2002).

Masonry benches (*sofat*) placed on both sides of the entrance to the courtyards of the houses marked the passage from the street to the dwelling space. The *sofat* – a distinctive element of vernacular architecture in Përmet (Adhami, 2001^b) – is a place of tran-



Figure I-4.1.9
Detail of a corner
with wooden ring
beam.



Figure I-4.1.10
Detail of a
composite solution
for a window
header.



Figure I-4.1.11
A decorated
wooden false
ceiling in a guest
room.



Figure I-4.1.12 – Interior view of the Church of St. Mary's portico.



Figure I-4.1.13 – The small courtyard, with a well at its centre, before the entrance of the Church of St. Mary.

sition between the public and private dimensions of living, as well as a place for social interaction and domestic work (embroidery, food processing, etc.) (Fig. I-4.1.14).

Other places that were equally important in community life were the fountain “Gurrëza e fshatit” and the threshing floors (*lëm*).

The fountain, which is currently inaccessible and in a bad state of preservation, is located in a very evocative landscape, connoted by dry stone walls and oak trees. It was a place for work and social interaction for the women of the village, supplied water to the families and served as a trough for watering animals (a function that is still active today).

The threshing floors are valuable testimonies to the agricultural identity of the village and to the peasant culture for which they were sacred places where it was absolutely forbidden to build (Muka, 2007). They had a flat circular surface (with a diameter of approximately 6 m), perfectly leveled and paved with stone slabs. The end of the harvest was celebrated with a popular feast that took place on the threshing floor. According to Kola (2002), there were six threshing floors in Bënjë. It was possible to visit only one of these (which is in a state of neglect, yet with its main features still easily identifiable).

Infrastructure networks

Based on the testimonies of the villagers, both the water supply system (renovated in the past decade) and the electric power system (installed in the Seventies) provide for the needs of the inhabitants throughout the year. However, the safety conditions of the electrical system of single buildings and public lighting are critical. Lampposts are mounted on cement poles (which are also used for distributing electricity to the houses) and have a negative impact on the traditional architecture of the village.

An even greater problem is the absence of a depuration plant for waste water, which currently flows into the stream that runs next to the village⁴.

⁴ The treatment of waste waters is a priority explicitly mentioned in the Development Plan for this area (Plani Operacional i Zhvillimit Vendor, 2016), also included in the current General Town Plan.



Figure I-4.1.14
A *sofat* as a transition place between the public and the private dimension of living.

Public services, shops and tourist facilities

In Bënjë there is no public service for the collection and treatment of rubbish. Waste is thrown by the inhabitants onto an open-air dump located near the fountain, and periodically burnt.

All basic public services are lacking, with the exception of health services, limited however to a medical doctor and a nurse who visit the village once a week and can be reached by phone in case of emergency.

Despite the presence of important tourist attractions (the Church of St. Mary, Katiu Bridge, the thermal baths, the canyon and the “Bredhi i Hotovës” National Park), there are no basic tourism services or restaurants in the village. The only possibility of accommodation is at the house of a former schoolteacher that has been transformed into a *bujtinë* (guest house). From information obtained on-field, it would seem that other inhabitants are willing to follow his steps.

The lack of services is further exacerbated by the absence of a public transportation system that could provide a connection with the thermal area and Përmet.

There is no mobile phone signal in most of the village.

Critical issues and future prospects

The set of landscape and architectural qualities that characterise Bënjë make it a recognisable place, with a precise identity, still capable of conveying the message of its original *genius loci*.

Despite the weaknesses described, this village, which is protected by the State, presents a wealth of qualities and it is therefore realistic to start a virtuous circle that could actively involve the local community and contribute to its socio-economic and touristic development.

Bënjë is an interesting case to which to apply the formula of the “dispersed hospitality” (see Dall’Ara, 2010), a form of accommodation that can create socio-economic value and promote social cohesion, the historic built heritage, the well-known culture of hospitality, and the pastoral and rural life. Dispersed hospitality could become for Bënjë the fulcrum of a sustainable development project, beginning with the conversion of dwellings into accommodation facilities and gradually involving the various components of public space, services and infrastructure networks.

In order to consistently correlate the various actions it is necessary to develop and implement an urban development instrument such as the Urban Recovery Plan (Plani i detajuar për zonat e rëndësisë kombëtare të trashëgimisë), aimed at safeguarding and enhancing the landscape and architectural heritage of the village in full compliance with regulatory obligations.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Organising educational activities for promoting the culture of hospitality

This Action aims at teaching the inhabitants of the village principles, methods and tools of dispersed and cooperative hospitality (see A.12).

The educational activity can be carried out in public meetings and seminars, organized by public and private entities active in the field of tourism promotion in the Municipality of Përmet.

S2 Planning Strategies

A.2 Preparation of the Bënjë Urban Recovery Plan

The Action aims at carrying out the urban planning instrument (Plani i detajuar për zonat e rëndësishme kombëtare të trashëgimisë) introduced by article 44 of Law 27/2018 (“Për trashëgiminë kulturore dhe muzetë”) which concerns protected historic centres. The purpose is to recover the built heritage in the village and initiate processes of re-use and functional conversion in the sector of tourism and in accordance with the provisions of said law and of the “Regulation for the historic centre of Bënjë” (Decree no. 776 of 02.11.2016).

This Regulation divides the village into two homogeneous zones which are subject to specific prescriptive measures:

- The historic centre (*Qendra Historike e fshatit Bënjë*), subject to restoration and conservative renovation actions, as well as to the total ban on new constructions in both public and private open spaces (art. 5);
- The buffer zone of the historic centre (*Zona e Mbrojtur*) in which expansions and new constructions are admitted within the limitations established in article 6.

The Action has been drawn up on this zoning and is divided into the 3 phases described below.

PHASE I. SURVEY

Prior to the drafting of the *Recovery Plan*, we suggest carrying out an investigation aimed at the knowledge and cataloguing of the existing built heritage, structured in the following manner:

- Historic, urban and landscape overview of the village;
- Cadastral inquiry (to determine who are the owners of the buildings);
- Analysis of the typological, functional and constructive features of the historic heritage;
- Identification of additions and alterations to the original buildings;
- Analysis of the state of conservation of the buildings (analysis of failure and decay);
- Cataloguing of buildings and open spaces into homogeneous categories.

The survey may be carried out through on field inquiries (selected interviews and architectural survey of buildings and open spaces⁽⁴⁾) and the analysis of scientific literature, including sources available from public entities and institutions.

PHASE 2. DRAFTING THE PLAN

Zone: Historic centre

Regarding the historic centre, the *Recovery Plan* shall:

- Propose restoration and conservative renovation actions with the aim of renovating the uninhabited historic built heritage – that is in a state of disrepair – fully respecting its formal, typological and technological elements;
- Provide for new intended uses that are compatible with the original identity of the village’s centre;
- The buildings, once refurbished, could host public services (to be placed in publicly-owned buildings, such as the former village school) or accommodation facilities (see A.10, A.12) designed to strengthen the village tourism offer. The functional conversion projects should safeguard the identity features of traditional buildings and the spatial and functional composition of the dwellings. Special attention must be put on the renovation and/or conservation of typical spaces such as the *oda e miqve* and the *shtëpia e zjarrit*, as well as on decorations of false ceilings and traditional furniture (e.g. *musëndra*).

With regard to private open spaces, we suggest measures that aim at:

- Regenerating private vegetable gardens and orchards, terraced with dry enclosure walls, so as to safeguard a ‘relic’ of the minute agricultural landscape and an everyday practice that reflects the rural identity of the village. From this perspective, our suggestion is to eliminate all the added structures that have a negative impact on the urban landscape, and to maintain all autochthonous plants (typical cultivations such as walnuts, plums, figs, pomegranate, white and black mulberries, as well as grapevines and other agricultural products) that add value to the landscape and ascribe identity to private space;
- Safeguarding the *sofat* and the entrance solutions with aesthetic value so as to preserve the identity of the village;
- Restoring the courtyards of houses that bear typical features and quality of dwelling. Conservation of the spatial patterns, as well as courtyards’ uses and original features – pavings, staircases and decorative elements in split stones, autochthonous plants (roses, for example) and grapevines on pergolas (*hardhi me pjergulla*) – are recommended;
- Restoring the threshing floor (*lëm*) by using local materials and traditional building techniques. We recommend restoring the original paving, keeping the stone slabs and respecting the circular geometric design of the threshing floor.

Zone: Buffer zone of the historic centre

Regarding the buffer zone of the historic centre, the *Recovery Plan* must establish criteria in terms of dimensions and rules for the inclusion of new building works in respect of the following objectives:

- Privilege housing units with traditional plan layouts (“U”, “E” or “L” typologies) and maintain the building-courtyard-garden relationship with the aim of preserving the continuity with the existing settlement fabric;
- Providing indications concerning: materials, technologies and installations, exterior shell and types of roofs, facade solutions, doors and windows and other elements that decorate the facade, so that the new constructions can be inserted into the urban landscape in accordance with compatibility criteria, thus mitigating the visual impact and in respect of the morphological features of the place;
- Basing the projects on environmental sustainability principles, favouring when possible the use of eco-compatible materials and renewable energy.

Concerning green spaces, which in Bënjë comprise structural components of the traditional settlement fabric and determine the form of the urban landscape, it is necessary that:

- Courtyards respect the specific features of the existing ones (cobble pavings, stone stairs and decorations with autochthonous plants and grapevines on pergolas (*hardhi me pjergulla*);
- Vegetable gardens with natural and agricultural value ensure aesthetic and functional quality through the choice of autochthonous plant species and enclosure systems that are consistent with local traditions.

PHASE 3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN

The implementation of the *Recovery Plan* can be undertaken under public or private initiative in accordance with the provisions of Part II – Section II “Ruajtja e pasurisë” of Law 27/2018.

The recommendation is to structure the recovery actions – both those regarding the historic centre and those concerning the area surrounding it – into Minimum Intervention Units (MIU).

A system of reward-based incentives (linked to the quality of the actions and the safeguarding of traditional features) could be promoted in order to encourage the conversion of the existing heritage into tourism facilities by private operators, as well as measures for supporting private ventures^(b).

S4 Living Quality Strategies

A.3 Ensuring adequate infrastructures

The upgrading of infrastructure networks (water and electricity supply, collection and treatment of wastewaters) in accordance with the provisions of the General Town Plan (Bashkia Përmet, 2020: 211, 216) is the necessary premise for any hypothesis of tourism development in the village.

Prior to designing these works, it is recommended that the following surveys be carried out:

- Inquiry as to the state of water and electricity supply and of the collection and treatment of waste waters;
- Assessment of the conditions of safety and efficiency of the systems and of domestic devices;
- Analysis and programming of works based on the provisions contained in the General Town Plan and in the sector plans;

- Feasibility study and preliminary cost analysis.

During the entire cognitive process (from the identification of needs to the evaluation of intermediate and final impacts), it is necessary to constantly interact with the inhabitants, through the mediation of the head of the village.

A.4 Creating a service for rubbish collection and disposal

Rubbish produced in the village is currently dumped in an open-air landfill and periodically burnt by the inhabitants.

In order to protect community health and the environment and in view of the tourism development of the village, it is necessary to supply rubbish bins and dumpsters for waste sorting and to establish an efficient rubbish collection and disposal service⁽²⁾.

This Action underlies the construction, by the Municipality of Përmet, of a plant for the collection and treatment of sorted waste and requires awareness by the inhabitants of the need to separate rubbish into different categories.

A.5 Enhancing public lighting

The Action aims to install an adequate lighting system for streets and collective open spaces, so as to offer the community and visitors better comfort and safety conditions. These lighting devices must have low energy consumption and be properly integrated into the architectural context of the village. The manufacture of the lighting devices could be entrusted to local artists/artisans (see A.5, cap. I.2).

A.6 Improving the condition of the road that connects the thermal area to the village

The Action aims to carry out repair works on the road from the thermal area to the village, at the same time as the new public lighting system. Since the current road (mostly dirt) is wide enough for most of its length, it would be worthwhile to determine a few scenic viewpoints that allow visitors to stop and contemplate the beauty of the landscape.

A.7 Constructing a parking area

With the purpose of improving the tourism supply, it would be advisable to build a car park in an appropriate area in the proximity of the village.

In order to mitigate the environmental impact of this parking, the recommendation is to:

- Adapt the size of the parking area to the needs of the community and the expected flow of tourists;
- Use permeable paving in order to favour the ground absorption of rainwater;
- Plant autochthonous shrubs and trees between the parking spaces;
- Install a low energy consumption and high efficiency lighting system.

A.8 Establishing a public transport line

With the aim of enhancing both the quality of life of the inhabitants (many of whom are elderly and do not have a private transport vehicle) and the development of tourism, it is necessary to provide a public transportation service that connects Bënjë with the thermal area and continues on to Përmet. This service could vary depending on the season. For example, during the summer the service could have a pre-established schedule, whereas in the winter it could become an on-call transportation service, with varying itineraries and schedules, depending on the mobility requirements of both inhabitants and visitors.

A.9 Repairing the path that links Bënjë to the thermal area

Many tourists who visit the thermal area are not aware of the existence and beauty of Bënjë. This Action aims at repairing the hiking path (parts of which are currently impassable) that connects Bënjë to the thermal area and passes through a remarkable landscape.

The redevelopment work should include:

- Removing from the trail any obstacles and/or hazards (weeds, shrub and tree branches, rocks, etc.) that obstruct the path;
- Survey of the track, indicating any critical issues and potentialities;
- Repairing and securing the path with the use of adequate consolidation techniques in those places where the ground is occluded or uneven;
- Build the paving of the section of the path in *kalldrëm* that goes from the Church of St. Mary to the Bënjë Bridge;
- Production and placement of signage and information panels concerning the thermal baths, the history of the village and the bio-diversity of the area;

- Establishment of equipped rest areas and scenic viewpoints to be enhanced, where appropriate, by works of art made by local artists;
- Placement of adequate fall protection elements wherever necessary;
- Installation of a lighting system along the path.

The recovery work undertaken on this path can serve as a model to be applied to other trails, such as the one that leads to the *Mulliri i Drithit* (see chap. I.3, A.9).

It would be advisable to carry out this Action at the same time as the project on the thermal area described in chap. I.3, A.8.

A.10 Creating additional public and tourist services

This Action proposes the construction of:

- A first-aid medical office. This medical service could be open daily in the summer, when there are more tourists and emigrants return to the village, and work as an on-call service during the other seasons;
- A tourist welcome centre, with an ATM included, offering visitors information on the landscape and architectural assets of the area and the recreational and sports activities available (for example guided tours, rafting on the Vjosa River, etc.).

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.11 Safety and conservation works to make dangerous buildings safe

Many of the village's buildings are in a precarious state of conservation. Identified problems involve mostly structural parts that in some cases present evident signs of instability and are therefore a safety hazard. The Action provides for the necessary safety measures, through temporary works. When the remained standing parts are minimal in relation to the whole building and do not have any particular architectural value, the option of demolishing and rebuilding may be evaluated. In such cases it is necessary to classify and store the demolished material so as to reuse it during the reconstruction of the buildings.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.12 Creating a Dispersed Hotel in Bënjë^(d)

This Action aims at favoring the recovery of the existing built heritage (beginning with any uninhabited structures), socio-economic development, social cohesion and the enhancement of the local tourism offer through the creation of a dispersed hotel (Dall'Ara, 2010).

It should ensure:

- Rooms distributed throughout the village;
- Common services grouped in one or more buildings;
- Hospitality services connected to the traditions of the place and the promotion of crafts, typical products and iso-polyphonic music;
- Unitary management, organised in an entrepreneurial manner and on a communal basis, for example through the establishment of a community cooperative^(e) (see Mori & Sforzi, 2018), which activates grass-root energies and strengthens social cohesion. The community cooperative attempts to produce value through an approach that enhances resources, both human and territorial. The various networks of local stakeholders (farmers, artisans, enterprises, association representatives, village elders and shepherds) should play leading roles in this type of enterprise.

The creation of the dispersed hotel should take place in conjunction with the Actions contemplated in chapters I.1, I.2, and I.3, which promote the land resources, food heritage, local crafts, iso-polyphonic music, etc.

A.13 Regenerating public spaces

The Action proposes to redevelop the existing public spaces in order to strengthen the sense of belonging among the inhabitants of the village, to increase the levels of safety and accessibility of places and to enhance their typical features. Redevelopment projects must be undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the "Regulations for the historic centre of Bënjë" established by the Decree of the Council of Ministers no. 776 of 02.11.2016.

Prior to the projects listed below it is necessary to carry out an analysis of the symbolic role of the individual public spaces in the everyday life and social practices of the community, as well as of their architectural and technological features.

RESTORATION OF ROADS (WITH KALLDRËM PAVING) AND OF RETAINING WALLS

The streets of the village as they are today are not very practicable and have a negative impact on the touristic image of the village. It is therefore necessary to repair them and make them more accessible to the various groups of users. The project should combine the tradition of ancient stone paving with new mobility needs. We suggest the use of local materials and patterns that are simple and resemble the existing ones, as well as respecting the uniformity of walking surfaces in all the areas covered by this project. It is necessary to provide handrails in steeped road sections, so as to make them safer for all, particularly the elderly (who are, now, the majority of the villagers).

The renovation of the streets should be accompanied with the construction of a rainwater disposal system that must respect the transverse profiles of the roadways.

The stone retaining walls that run along the streets of the village must be consolidated and repaired; any existing invasive plant species, if harmful, must be removed.

RESTORATION OF THE “GURRËZA E FSHATIT” FOUNTAIN AND OF THE SURROUNDING SPACE

This work aims at repairing the water system, cleaning and replacing any missing or damaged parts so as to enhance the overall state of the place. Since the location of the fountain is difficult to access, the original path that leads to it from the residential area should also be repaired.

ESTABLISHMENT OF REST AREAS AND SCENIC VIEWPOINTS

Given the dominant position of the village over the surrounding landscape, it would be desirable, where possible, to establish rest areas, scenic viewpoints, terraces and other types of spaces for contemplating the valley. These projects must respect the authenticity of the places, using materials that are compatible with the original ones, thus ensuring consistency and harmony between the existing and the new.

S7 Management Strategies*A.14 Preparing the Urban Maintenance Plan of the historic centre of Bënjë*

This Action is aimed at the preparation of a *Maintenance Plan* to ensure a programmed procedure of assessments and works for the maintenance of public spaces and the architectural heritage with the purpose of preserving through time the value, functions and qualitative features of the historic centre of Bënjë in accordance with Decree no. 776 of 02.11.2016.

The *Maintenance Plan* should provide for a detailed planning of the operations to be undertaken. It should determine the right time to carry them out and the most adequate executive practices, the management of the costs, the operators in charge of maintenance procedures and the competent workforce. With the purpose of involving the community in the processes of urban maintenance, and also with the intention of strengthening the sense of belonging to the village, some of the tasks regarding collective spaces (those which are less onerous and more straightforward, such as the cleaning of some spaces) may be entrusted to a community cooperative or carried out directly by those inhabitants who wish to improve the place they live in.

Notes

- a) The preparation of a data sheet is recommended, in order to describe each building in a structured manner. The sheet should include information upon the building typology, construction techniques, the state of conservation, structural conditions, and its evolution in time. For an example of a data sheet, see Annex 2.
- b) To this purpose refer to the European regulations concerning sustainable tourism (for example the Charter of Sustainable Tourism; Charter of Lanzarote) and/or the indications developed by UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization).
- c) See Bashkia Përmet, 2020: 171, 238.
- d) Among the many Italian examples, one that presents similarities to the case of Bënjë is the dispersed hotel of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, in Abruzzo (<<https://www.sextantio.it/santostefano/albergo-diffuso-in-abruzzo/>>).
- e) There are many examples of community cooperatives that manage dispersed hotels in Italy. An interesting case is the Mediaeval hamlet of Borgo del Fiume (in Fiumefreddo Bruzio, Calabria) (<<https://www.borgodifume.it/>>).

SECTION I.4.2 – KOSINË

Historical overview

The settlement of Kosinë stands next to the Church of the Dormition of Mary (12th century), which perhaps once was part of a monastic complex (see sect. I.5.2) (Fig. I-4.2.1).

We have no knowledge of when people first settled near the church. The first evidence of the existence of the village is of a much later date. According to François Pouqueville – a French doctor who was on a diplomatic mission to the court of Ali Pasha of Ioannina between 1806 and 1815 – in Kosinë in the early 19th century there were approximately 20 families of shepherds, probably Vlachs. (Adhami, 2001^a). Constantin Burileanu – who visited Kosinë in the first decade of 20th century and dedicated it a chapter of his *I Romeni di Albania* travel book – refers that 45 Vlach families and only 3 Albanian families lived in the village (Burileanu, 1912).

The hilly area on which the cistern that ensures the supply of water to the inhabitants is located, is a significant place in the historical memory of the village. The cistern was made during the years of the Communist regime, together with some bunkers that replaced two religious buildings, a small church and a *teqe*, the Bektashi place of worship. The campaign for the destruction of religious buildings that began in 1967 did not spare this area of Kosinë, and completely erased the material memory of the place. After the fall of the regime, and in opposition to its destructive fury, the villagers carried out a deeply meaningful symbolic gesture when they placed a white cross by the entrance to one of the underground bunkers. A slender but powerful, indisputable sign in the landscape, it is the expression of a strong collective will to rise above the effacement of memory and the violence suffered on one of the most intimate levels: that of the relationship with the sacred.



Figure I-4.2.1
A view of the village
of Kosinë with
the Church of the
Dormition of Mary
in the background.

The residential area

Kosinë is one of the largest villages in the Municipality of Përmet, which is 7 km away. It is located in the proximity of road SH75, which runs along the slopes of Mount Kosinë and the Vjosa Valley. The river interacts with the life of the village and connects it to Përmet and Këlcyrë.

The settlement is divided into four different quarters, one of which is known as “quarter of the Vlachs”. The oldest quarter is located on the ridge and near the church, with which it occupies the upper part of the village.

When compared to Leusë and Bënjë, the centre of Kosinë is more featureless. Unlike the other two villages, Kosinë has lost many of the small functional spaces on the sides of the streets which served as areas for rest and social interaction (*sofat, kroi, gardhi*), as well as the *kalldrëm* paving. Furthermore, most of the dwellings were built during the years of the regime, or else after the Nineties (Fig. I-4.2.2). In the oldest quarter, however, there are still some traditional buildings which keep the link to the past alive (Fig. I-4.2.3).

The traditional dwellings

Typological features

Orographic factors strongly affect the morphology of the village. The houses are located on both sides along the sloping main road, producing a ‘double comb’ distributive layout (Fig. I-4.2.4).

The prevailing building typology is that of the isolated rural house built inside an enclosed courtyard that has agricultural annexes and orchards (Fig. I-4.2.5).

The original dwelling usually consists of a three-part rectangular building that faces the street on one side and the countryside on the other. Dwellings are usually two-storey, the first slightly below the street level. In the past the mixed use of dwellings was common: the ground floor for agricultural purposes and the upper floor for residential purposes. With some exceptions, today both levels of the dwellings are used for residential purposes. This transformation of the use of the spaces probably derives from the need to accommodate married children and therefore from the expansion of the family nucleus.

During the Seventies and Eighties L-shaped single level houses became widespread. Subsequent buildings do not present features that connect them to the historic building typology (Fig. I-4.2.6).



Figure I-4.2.2 – A typical building typology of the Hoxha regime years.



Figure I-4.2.3 – A traditional building in the oldest quarter of the village.



Figure I-4.2.4 *Building features and state of conservation*

The urban settlement pattern of Kosinë. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

Figure I-4.2.5
Enclosed courtyards in Kosinë.

Historic buildings in Kosinë have undergone many modifications over the years. Appurtenance areas, for example, only rarely preserve their original dry-assembled stone enclosure walls (Fig. I-4.2.7).

Walls are made with three-leaf stone masonry whose exterior face presents exposed ashlar. In some ruined houses it is possible to see timber reinforcement elements embedded within the walls and arranged in horizontal planes, which run continuously along the length of the walls.

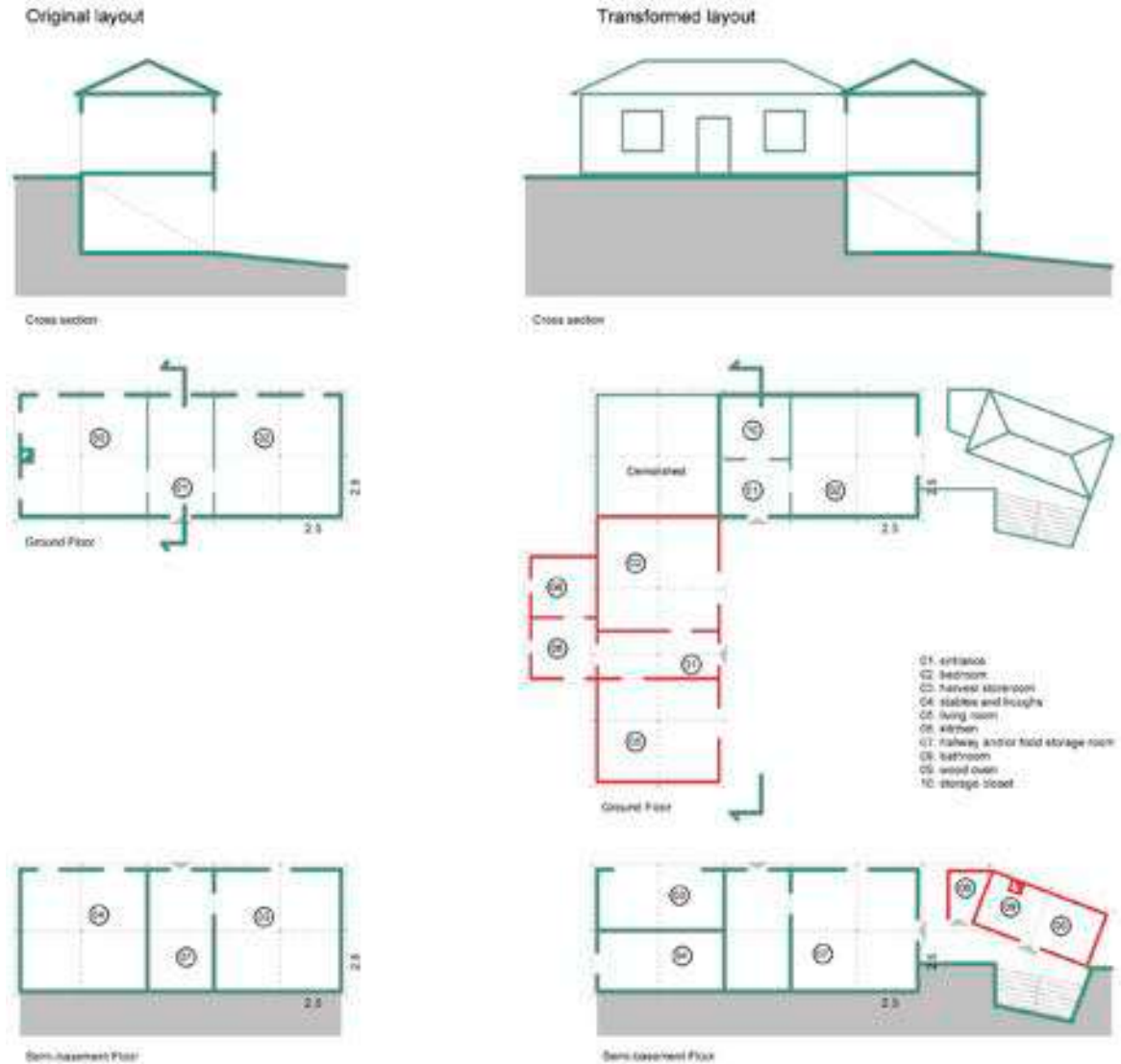
The original partitions, with frameworks of timber and reeds plastered with mud mortar, have been replaced in many cases with walls made with hollow bricks. Exterior openings usually have timber or stone lintels. In more recent works there are larger openings with lintels in reinforced concrete.

The original wooden floors were mostly replaced by cast-in-place reinforced concrete floors.

Roofs are the parts of the old houses that underwent fewer modifications; they are of the hip type and covered with stone slabs.

Recent dwellings usually have a reinforced concrete structure, envelopes and partitions in hollow bricks and roof covering in brick tiles.

The old buildings of Kosinë which have been continuously inhabited generally do not present serious deficiencies, since they have undergone periodical restoration works, maintenance and replacement of decayed elements. In some cases, however, some deep cracks that have sometimes been filled with mortar can be seen.



These cracks can be due to seismic activity or else to incorrect restoration works. Some abandoned buildings are in a state of ruin; others are still well preserved (for example, the former general store of the village and the warehouse facing the square S. Dhima) (Fig. I-4.2.8).

Public space

When attempting to identify the original public space in Kosinë, it is inevitable to refer to the Church of the Dormition of Mary (see sect. I.5.2). The church is located at the main point of access to the settlement, in a dominant position surrounded by the fluvial landscape of the Vjosa and the forests of fir, oak and pine. In addition to its religious function and thanks to the open spaces that surround it, the church has historically played an important social and collective role.

Figure I-4.2.6 Hypothesis on the original layout of the domestic space and transformations occurred over time concerning two typologies of the historic centre of Kosinë. [Author: Dritan Kapo]



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Figure I-4.2.7 Near the church, there is also the village school (pre-school, primary and middle).

A dry stone retaining wall. The green area that surrounds the school is used by the students as a courtyard and by shepherds as grazing land for their flocks. It blends into the beauty of the surrounding landscape and lives in close symbiosis with the most ancient nucleus of the village,

but at the same time constitutes an unfinished space that lacks functional and formal motivation (Fig. I-4.2.9).

Figure I-4.2.8
The former general store of the village.

The village's square (Stefan Dhima square) is located where the main street crosses the one that leads to the new quarters. For the inhabitants of Kosinë the square seems to be more of a place of passage than a place for resting and for social interaction. The role of meeting place is taken instead by bars, frequented exclusively by males, as is usual in rural Albanian areas (Fig. I-4.2.10).

Near the square are the sports field and a playground. The latter is in a state of disrepair and is therefore not used. As in the past, the actual 'playground' for the village children seems to be the street.



9



10

Infrastructure networks

Overall, the water and electricity supply networks are more efficient in Kosinë than in Leusë or Bënjë, and this is also true for the systems of dwellings. Most houses have a water tank on the roof equipped with an autoclave. These tanks, usually blue in colour, are a distinctive feature of the urban landscape (Fig. I-4.2.11).

Sewers do not provide for the separation between black and grey waters and discharge directly into the Vjosa untreated.

Unlike Bënjë and Leusë, Kosinë has a municipal rubbish collection service. Unfortunately, dumpsters are emptied at irregular intervals, often causing congestion, which in turn results in bad smell and, more importantly, hygiene and health issues.

Along the streets there are lampposts mounted on cement poles that also serve for distributing electricity to the houses. The last road repair works have led to an improvement of the public lighting system as well.

Figure I-4.2.9
The open space around the school.

Figure I-4.2.10
The Stefan Dhima square in the centre of the village.



Figure I-4.2.11
Blue water tanks as
a hallmark of the
urban landscape.

Public services, shops and tourist facilities

The village has the main public services (post, first-aid medical office, nursery, elementary and middle school), but lacks any places of social interaction other than bars. In the interviews carried out during the on-site visits, some women complained of the lack of a place for socialising and for after-school activities for their children.

There is no public parking area, nor is there a public transportation system connecting the village to Përmet.

The village has no accommodation, restaurants or other tourism-related services.

Many dwellings have Internet connection and the quality of the mobile phone signal is generally adequate, with the exception of some isolated areas of the village.

In Kosinë there are two bars and a small general store. There are not tourist accommodation (July 2020).

Critical issues and future prospects

Kosinë has undergone through the years a process of expansion due to the modest yet gradual increase in population.

Currently, there are a number of deficiencies related to the public spaces and services, as well as the total absence of activities capable of promoting tourism.

A first aspect in which it would be necessary to invest concerns the enhancement of cultural and social services that favour social cohesion. These services should be developed in synergy with projects aimed at returning spaces for children to play in, the square, and the open space surrounding the school and the Church of the Dormition of Mary to the community. This open space, reinterpreted in a new functional key, could play an important role in the process of enhancement of the village, especially considering the iconic value of the church (see Fig. I-5.2.8).

On the other hand, it is necessary to invest in the promotion of tourism, encouraging the process of recovery of the unused built heritage and its conversion into accommodation facilities as well as in the creation of tourism itineraries. They should pass through a variety of landscapes and historic-cultural attractions, including the Church of the Dormition of Mary, triggering various collateral activities: accommodation in *bujtinë*, food and wine tasting and trekking-guide services (Fig. I-4.2.12).



Figure I-4.2.12
A view of the Vjosa
Valley from the
area surrounding
the Church of the
Dormition of Mary.
[Photo: Samuela
Hidri]

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Environmental education project in the school of Kosinë

Carrying out an awareness campaign among the students of the school of Kosinë concerning the importance of a careful management of the waste cycle, is to be considered a strategic action. The students, in turn, could bring this awareness of responsible behaviours vis-à-vis the environment to their families. In order to carry out this type of activity, teachers could receive support from environmental organisations and the NGOs that operate in the area and have experience in these matters. Educating the population to correctly dispose of waste may also be a useful tool for strengthening their sense of care for the place they live in.

This Action is preparatory for Action A.4.

S3 Social Cohesion Strategies

A.2 Creating a Community and Artisan Centre

In order to support women's aspirations for a greater social and economic autonomy, we suggest creating a meeting and work place which includes:

- Interaction spaces for women;
- Play areas for children;
- Small equipped workshops for traditional activities, both related to women (such as embroidery or weaving) and to men (wood and metal work or pyrography);
- Space for selling the artisanal products made in the workshop.

In the centre of the village there are currently abandoned buildings that could house this social structure. In order to begin with the workshops, a preparatory activity could be devised with support from the NGO CESVI, which over the past years has organised several educational activities concerning the revival of ancient crafts in the area of Përmet.

Through this Action, Kosinë could be included in the Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD), a network of associations and NGOs (both Albanian and foreign) which has been active since 2015 in the promotion of rural culture through a series of projects aimed at involving the local community in a "community based sustainable development"^(a).

S4 Living Quality Strategies

A.3 Ensuring adequate infrastructures

See A.3, sect. I.4.1

A.4 Enhancing the rubbish collection system

This Action aims at improving the management of domestic waste so as to enhance the quality of life of community members, as well as tourism development.

For this purpose it is necessary to act on two levels:

- Activate the system of waste recycling, in accordance with the General Town Plan of Përmet (Bashkia Përmet, 2020: 171, 238), providing the village with adequate dumpsters.
- Increase the waste collection system (which is currently intermittent).

The efficiency of this Action depends on the presence of a waste collection and treatment centre providing a service for the whole municipal area.

A.5 Enhancing the usability of the vehicular road that passes through the village, in accordance with local traditions

The streets that pass through the village should be provided with gutters to carry away rainwater.

Where possible, it is advisable to build sidewalks.

It is also advisable to repair the *kalldrëm* paving of the historic road that runs along the enclosure wall of the church and reaches the entrance to the village.

A.6 Construction of a parking area

See A.7, sect. I.4.1

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.7 Restoration and conversion of uninhabited buildings into traditional accommodation facilities

This Action aims at favouring the conversion of the traditional dwellings of the village which are now uninhabited into *bujtina*.

The *bujtinë* is a sort of guest house, often characterised by a traditional architecture and by the wish to bring the visitor closer to the local culture (for example through meals based on traditional recipes, furniture and decorations typical of the traditional rural house, the possibility of participating in everyday activities, etc.)^(b).

Redevelopment works should be carried out in accordance with the recognised cultural conservation methodologies. Therefore the recommendation is to:

- Preserve the typical morphological, dimensional, technological features of traditional architecture;
- Improve the accessibility to the building and its open spaces;
- Maintain/re-establish the relationships between the buildings and their context;
- Limit any buildings' extensions to the short sides of the ground floors, paying special attention to the treatment of exterior facades so as to better highlight the historical stratification of the building;
- Carry out the structural rehabilitation works (restoration of static safety and seismic improvement) as contemplated by the regulations in force;
- Upgrade building systems in view of the new functions, in accordance with standard engineering principles and regulatory codes;
- Design sustainable solutions concerning energy savings and interior comfort.

A.8 Restoration of the school and the surrounding area

The village school – located at the centre of a panoramic space that overlooks the Vjosa Valley – is in urgent need of functional and hygienic-sanitary redevelopment works.

The redevelopment project should provide for:

- Structural rehabilitation of the building so as to ensure static safety and seismic improvements;
- Accessibility to both exterior and interior spaces;
- Renovation of technological systems and equipment, using sustainable solutions for energy saving and interior comfort;
- Renovation of the toilet facilities;
- Replacement of school furniture;
- Construction of a gym where children are able to carry out recreational and sports activities during the winter.

The redevelopment of the outdoor spaces of the school for their use in recreational and sports and/or after-school activities in the service of the community should be undertaken at the same time as the project for recovering the open spaces surrounding the church (see A.6 and A.10, sect. I.5.2).

A.9 Repair of the sports field and the playground

This Action aims at redeveloping the sports field and the village playground.

For the sports field the following works are suggested:

- The construction of a pedestrian access to the field;
- The construction of an equipped changing room;
- The repair of the field and the existing fence;
- The installation of benches and of an adequate lighting system.

Regarding the existing playground, it is necessary to rethink the space and to construct, in full respect of safety requirements, play equipment inspired on the local tradition conceived together with the children and made by local artists/artisans.

A.10 Redevelopment of Stefan Dhima Square

The village's square requires a design aimed at making it a welcoming place well integrated into the urban fabric.

To this end we propose the following:

- Conceiving the square as a flexible space linked to everyday life activities (rest, social interaction, etc.) and to the organisation of small community events (such as a farmer's market);

- Providing for the use of forms and paving materials which are consistent with the local context;
- Using furniture preferably made by local artist/artisans and autochthonous plants;
- Applying the inclusive design principles;
- Using an energy-saving and highly efficient lighting system.

It would be advisable to extend the redevelopment project also to the areas adjacent to the square, where three businesses (two bars and a small general store) are located.

A.11 Promoting the creation of a horse trail

In connection with the rural vocation of the place, its strategic location from a naturalistic point of view and with the *Greenway System* Action (A.14, chap. I.3), we suggest the creation of a horse trail^(c), so as to increase the touristic potential of the village. This project could become an interesting opportunity for an integral land promotion that includes history, nature, education, tourism, tradition and the local typical production.

For this purpose our suggestion is to:

- Set the horse trail along the existing network of paths, or else develop it through the repair of other tracks which are suited to equestrian tourism, so as to create an offer in combination with other types of hiking (e.g. cycling) and suitable for hosting environmental education projects;
 - Provide the chosen trails with adequate signage, as well as with equipped rest areas;
 - Build a stable for the horses, connected to an outdoor space for them to walk or run around.
-

Notes

- a) ANRD is a member of the Balkan Network for Rural Development and of PREPARE (Partnership for Rural Europe). There are currently four ongoing multi-year projects, mostly financed by the European Union (see <https://anrd.al/ongoing/>), that are devised for offering: educational courses aimed at social inclusion and the creation of specific skills; the opportunity for creating small local enterprises; and support to Civil Society Organisations (OSC).
- b) In order to implement this Action it would be advisable to promote incentives on the model of the SARED Programme “Mbështetja për Bujqësinë dhe Zhvillimin Rural në zonat e prapambetura të Shqipërisë”. (See <<https://bujqesia.gov.al/udhezuesi-per-aplikantet-3/>>).
- c) Some interesting examples have been developed in Tuscany, specifically “Le ippovie della Provincia di Livorno” and the “L’ippovia del Monte Pisano”, in the Municipality of Capannori (see <<https://www.regione.toscana.it/documents/10180/24008/Aree+naturali+protette+toscane/>>).

SECTION I.4.3 – LEUSË

Historical overview

The first settlement in Leusë is mentioned in Ottoman fiscal records as far back as 1431. The location of the village perhaps derived from its vicinity to an easy route toward Ioannina that thus ensured a swift communication with Greece.

The current village was probably consolidated during the 19th century as a residential district of Përmet, inhabited predominantly by merchants, artisans and intellectuals. Despite constant emigration (especially to the United States, Turkey and Greece), the number of inhabitants reached its maximum in 1923.

The fire caused by the Nazis during World War II (Saliu, 2011) marked the history of the village. From that moment onward, a period of decline began for Leusë that is still ongoing; from a prosperous and lively village it turned into a semi-abandoned hamlet waiting to be regenerated.

The episode of the fire brought about a drastic change also to the original layout of the settlement, which featured by two-storey buildings with formal and building features that were typical of stately homes. From that period, a few buildings have survived, as well as *kalldrëm* paved streets and the enclosure and retaining walls that continue to constitute the structural apparatus of the settlement's fabric (Fig. I-4.3.1).

With the advent of the Communist regime, the original inhabitants of the village (most of whom emigrated to Greece) were replaced with peasant families from the surrounding villages working in the new collectivised structures (agricultural cooperatives).

The residential area

Leusë is located on the slopes of Mount Dhëmbel, at 1.3 km from Përmet. It is a village with a compact morphology affected by orography features.

The road that links it to Përmet is very bumpy and is only practicable with 4-wheel drive vehicles such as SUVs; on foot it takes 40-50 minutes to reach Përmet. The overall conditions of the road, worsened by the absence of lighting, hamper the everyday life of the villagers (most of whom are elderly) and undoubtedly limit the flow of tourists who may be interested in visiting the Church of the Dormition of Mary and the village itself.

Similar problems concern the inner *kalldrëm* streets are steeply sloping and are passable, with some difficulty, only on foot.



Figure I-4.3.1 – The main street of the village paved in *kalldrëm* and its water drainage channel in the middle.



Figure I-4.3.2
A traditional
entrance door to a
courtyard with the
sofat.

The traditional dwellings

Typological features

During the post-war period, the village maintained its vocation as a prevalingly sylvo-pastoral settlement. This is reflected also in the dwelling culture, which reduces to a minimum the residential space.

The most widespread typology is the isolated one-storey house, placed at the centre of an enclosed courtyard with dry stone walls. The main entrance includes the typical stone *sofat* facing the street (Fig. I-4.3.2). The courtyard determines the urban landscape and establishes a close relationship between the place of dwelling (house) and that of work (domestic and agricultural).

In comparison to Bënjë, courtyards are larger in Leusë and include the vegetable garden and all service annexes (storerooms, larders, kitchens, stables, toilets, etc.). These are distributed along the inner walls of the enclosure following an order related to the needs of the family nucleus. The configuration of the courtyard probably derives from the small size of the dwelling. The vegetable garden plays a central role in terms of basic food supply and is a historically rooted component of the dwelling culture (Figs. I-4.3.3 and I-4.3.4).

Dwellings usually consist of a tripartite rectangular building with the entrance in a central position on the long side of the rectangle. The hallway leads from the entrance to the two opposite rooms. In houses that originally had two-storeys, the hallway housed the staircase. There is no evidence that in these houses the ground floor was originally used as a stable, or for placing the services, especially considering the purely residential nature of these residences before the fire of 1943. It was very probably, used as a living area, with the bedrooms on the upper floor.

The modifications (enlargement of doors and windows, expansions, demolition and reconstruction of the house, etc.) which the buildings underwent through time have generated floor plan variations that have transformed the functional layout of the dwelling.

The expansions – which for reasons of executive simplicity were undertaken through a horizontal, rather than vertical addition of volumes – took place in three different ways:

1. Expansion by *rotation*, which permits the placement of the added volume near the entrance, with an independent entrance. This addition often results from the enlargement of the family (for example the case of adding a bedroom for a married son);
2. Expansion by *translation*, in order to build a new space for services (bathroom, kitchen with oven, a storeroom) which were originally located outside;
3. Expansion by *amassing*, which generates small rooms for satisfying a wide variety of everyday needs. The toilet, the kitchen-dining room and, more rarely, the bedroom, are placed in the middle of the larger side of the building and in proximity of the hallway, thus producing a T-shaped plan layout (Fig. I-4.3.5).

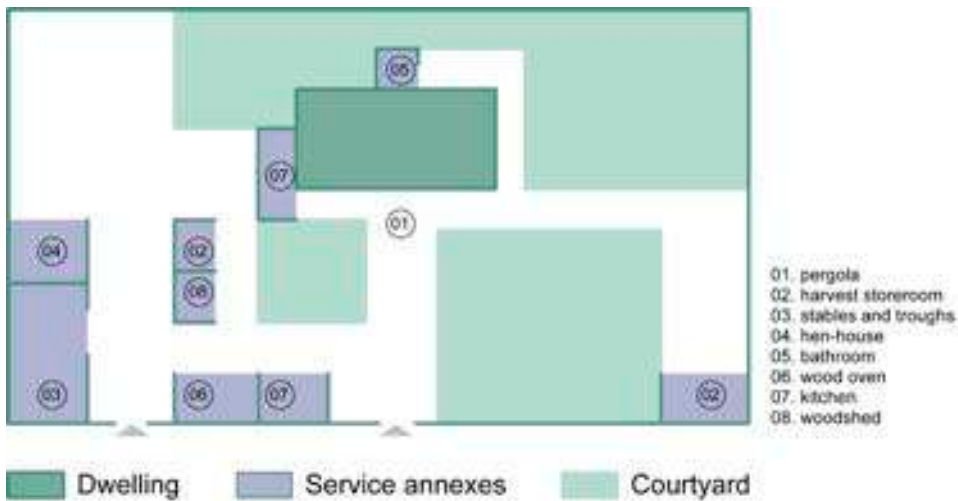


Figure I-4.3.3
The layout of the dwelling spaces in Leusë. [Author: Dritan Kapo]



Figure I.4.3.4
A flowerly courtyard in a dwelling of Leusë.

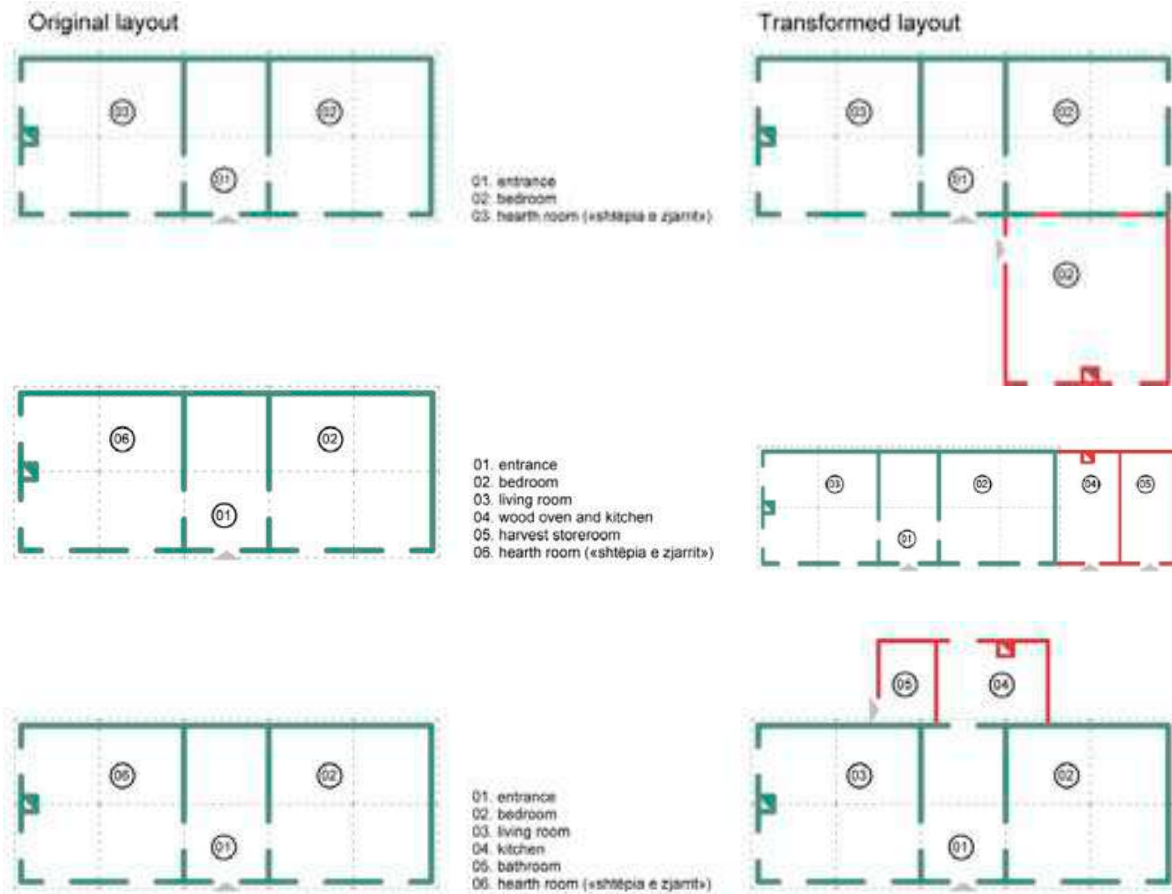


Figure I-4.3.5 *Building features and state of conservation*

Hypothesis on the original layout of the domestic space (*left*) and transformations that occurred over time (*right*). Above: Transformation by rotation. Middle: Transformation by translation. Below: Transformation by amassing. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

The buildings in Leusë are characterised by the use of the local stone: masonry, roofs, enclosure walls and pavings are all made of this material. Enclosure and retaining walls, which often survived both wars and earthquakes, are dry-assembled with rectangular stone blocks (Fig. I-4.3.6).

The load-bearing walls of houses are built with three-leaf masonry with a thickness of 50-70 cm. The external face is made of regular ashlars bound with lime mortar. The presence of anti-seismic protection devices such as ring beams and timber frames within the masonry, tie-rods for arch reinforcement and wedges, bear witness to a history of earthquakes and of the attempts to respond to horizontal actions.

In older buildings, exterior openings are generally smaller. Headers are of different types: from simple stone or timber lintels to more complex ones with lintels and relieving arch. In more recent cases, there are wider openings with lintels in reinforced concrete.

Intermediate floors are usually in timber, with a simple frame and transverse stiffening elements in the thickness of the beams. The floor is completed with boarding directly nailed onto the beams, which is also the paving of the upper storey. A less common variation is the floor made of beams and joists that support the boarding floor.

Ground floors usually present the same structure as intermediate floors, thus confirming their original residential use.



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Figure I-4.3.6 – An abandoned stone building in Leusë.

Figure I-4.3.7 – The roof carpentry of a house in Leusë.

Some of the ground floors have been replaced by reinforced concrete slabs over a crawl space, in which case they are often paved with ceramic tiles.

Partitions are usually made with timber and reeds.

The structure of the roof is usually composed of simple timber trusses with rafters, tie-beam and king post (Fig. I-4.3.7). The boarding is nailed to the trusses and on it the dry-assembled stone-slabs of the covering are laid.

There are often false ceilings (made of plastered reeds or of timber planks) supported by timber elements.

Many buildings present major structural problems due to a variety of causes: abandonment, earthquakes, lack of maintenance, inadequate restoration works, etc.

Public space

Public space in Leusë consists of an ensemble of elements – the Church of the Dormition of Mary and its portico, the fountains, the streets and the small square near the former school – which carry out their function in close connection with the buildings around them.

The essence of the community finds expression in the Church of the Dormition of Mary (see sect. I.5.3) and its portico (*hajat*) where once, after mass, the inhabitants gathered for the village assembly (*kuvendi i fshatit*) (Saliu, 2011).

In addition to this place with its double nature (secular and religious), the other important public spaces in the life of the community were the village's three fountains (*kroi*) (Fig. I-4.3.8). One of these is located along the road to Përmet, while the other two are in the village. The fountains are built using the same building techniques found in other rural contexts in Albania. Although part of their functions have been lost (they are currently used only to supply water and for watering animals), the *kroi* are identity-conveying elements of the place, since they bear witness to the work and life of the community. The two *kroi* located in the village are set into the stone walls of courtyards and are components of the urban space in relation with the network of winding lanes paved in *kalldrëm*.

The street in Leusë is not understood only as the physical network in support of the movement of people and of flocks led to the surrounding pastures or into the mountains for the practice of transhumance, but also as the backbone of the public space system on which the functioning of life itself in the village depended. It was a multi-functional space consisting of a set of components and places. This sylvo-pastoral and partially agricultural vocation can be easily understood when walking along the streets of the village, where recesses or seats along the retaining walls were used for leaning heavy objects, or simply as surfaces for sitting and resting (Fig. I-4.3.9).

The entrance of the courtyards with their *sofat*, which in Leusë take on a special symbolic and aesthetic value, are worthy of mention. They communicate with the outside through a whole series of minute signs to be read and interpreted and are so varied that it would seem that no two are alike. They are the hallmarks of the village.

The only 'square' in the village is located at the point where three lanes cross: it is the space opposite the former school. This irregular space is bounded by two buildings. At the moment its usability is compromised as a result of very damaged paving, while its formal aspect is weakened by the state of decay of the buildings facing it.

The urban components described so far reveal a masterful use of public space, made of functions, forms and behaviours, and evoke a simple and artless world concealed under years of degradation and abandonment. Although they have become weak both in terms of usage and the loss of their role as privileged places in the collective memory,

these components are an unquestionable element of identity and a potential value to be preserved and enhanced.

Infrastructure networks

The inhabitants of Leusë face a critical situation regarding the supply of both water and electricity (cf. Bashkia Përmet, 2020). The waterworks supply low-quality water (for drinking purposes the inhabitants still use the water from the *kroi*) and in a discontinuous manner. The constant interruptions of the electric service and the low-voltage impeding the proper functioning of a recently installed pump plant, are an obstacle to the installation of water tanks with autoclaves, and compromise the use of home appliances (in particular boilers and washing-machines).

Leusë does not have a sewage network. Sewage is mainly disposed of in leaching cesspools located in the courtyard. Likewise, greywater, together with rainwater, are dispersed directly into the ground.

Domestic waste is disposed of in an open-air dump along the road to Përmet and periodically burnt.



Figure I-4.3.8 – A fountain in the centre of the village.

Public services, shops and tourist facilities

There are no public services and shops in the village.

For hosting tourists there are 3 guest houses (July, 2020).

There is no mobile phone signal in many areas of the village.

Critical issues and future prospects

The authenticity of the built heritage and the presence of the Church of the Dormition of Mary, confer on Leusë a peculiar image that can be taken advantage of when determining recovery strategies aimed at the development of tourism.

This image is strengthened by the strategic location of the village, by the sylvo-pastoral identity that is reflected in the quality of dairy products, and last but not least, by the generous sense of hospitality of its inhabitants.

The human, landscape and architectural wealth offered by the village must certainly be safeguarded but in order to activate a process of regeneration, several action need to be taken concerning those weak points that slow down any hypothesis of development. From this perspective, it seems neces-



Figure I-4.3.9 – Stone seats along the street.



Figure I-4.3.10
The poor conditions of the road to Përmet make the life of the villagers difficult and hamper the tourism development possibilities.

sary to intervene globally on all the infrastructure networks and on the redevelopment of the road that connects the village to Përmet (Fig. I-4.3.10).

Part of the large abandoned built heritage could be used as accommodation facilities (e.g. *bujtina* and services focused on the culinary tradition). This integration, by strengthening the artisan tradition of food production and supporting a family-based agricultural economy, could have positive effects also in view of the desired re-population of the village.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Organising educational activities aimed at promoting the culture of hospitality

See A.1, sect. I.4.1

S4 Living Quality Strategies

A.2 Redevelopment of the road between Përmet and Leusë and construction of a small car park at the entrance of the village

In view of the development of tourism and of the betterment of the quality of life of the community, repair of the road that connects the village to Përmet must be considered a priority.

The road, due to its landscape potential, should be designed in terms of slow mobility, favouring the perception of the landscape of the Vjosa Valley and enhancing its attractions, beginning with the Church of the Dormition of Mary which, from its dominant position on the hill, is first seen by the visitors.

The following works are proposed:

- Signage for the village and the church from the main roads in Përmet;
- Repair of the road in *kalldrëm* paving using local materials and patterns;
- Installation of a road lighting system;
- Creation of rest areas and viewpoints at scenic panoramas, including the appropriate information panels;
- Planting of autochthonous trees and shrubs on the sides of the road.

Vehicular access should be made available to villagers, tourists, emergency vehicles and public transportation.

We suggest the construction of a small parking area, near the church and in an unobtrusive position, adequately shaded by autochthonous trees and properly illuminated. The paving of the parking area should be of a permeable type to prevent harmful rainwater run off.

A.3 Ensuring adequate infrastructures

See A.3, sect. I.4.1

S5 Knowing and Safeguarding Strategies

A.4 Cognitive enquiry and cataloguing of the built heritage of Leusë

See Phase I of the *Urban Recovery Plan* proposed in A.2, sect. I.4.1

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Restoration and conversion of uninhabited buildings into traditional accommodation facilities

See A.7, sect. I.4.2

A.6 Creating a Multi-functional Centre in the former village school

The location of Leusë at the crossroads of existing tourism itineraries makes the village a strategic place for the exploration of the area.

The Action proposes the creation of a *Multi-functional Centre* at the former village school, a building that expresses the traditional architecture of the village.

This Centre could house the following functions:

- A visitor centre, with info-point and ATM;
- A shop for tasting and purchasing the typical products of the village;
- A small community centre for consolidating the sense of belonging to the village and its traditions.

The redevelopment project should include:

- Structural rehabilitation in order to ensure the static safety of the building and the anti-seismic improvement envisaged by technical regulations;
- Redevelopment of the technical plants in relation to the new functions;
- Redevelopment of the outdoor space;
- Use of sustainable solutions for energy saving and interior comfort.

Management of the *Multi-functional Centre* could be entrusted to a community enterprise/cooperative (see A.1).

A.7 Redeveloping urban spaces

This Action aims at redeveloping the existing public spaces so as to enhance the inhabitants' quality of life and develop tourism.

Prior to this it is necessary to carry out an analysis of the components of the urban landscape and of their role in the everyday lives of the villagers.

We suggest the following works:

RECOVERY OF THE STREETS AND SQUARES

- Rehabilitation of streets with *kalldrëm* paving and repair of the retaining walls that run alongside them (see A.13, chap. I.4.1);
- Repair drains for carrying off rainwater, as well as water from *kroi*, choosing those solutions with a lesser impact so as to alter the overall image of the original road network as little as possible;
- Installation of a street lighting system using solutions that are in harmony with highly sensitive context;
- Redevelopment of the square in front the former school. Our suggestion is to use materials, forms, street furniture and plants that are as consistent as possible with the local context.

RESTORATION OF SOFAT AND COURTYARD ENTRANCES

This work aims at restoring the *sofat* and the aesthetically valuable entrance doorways so as to safeguard an identity element of the village. Prior to this, we recommend cataloguing the various types of doors through the analysis of the original colours and materials that are still in use.

RESTORATION OF THE THREE FOUNTAINS OF THE VILLAGE

See A.13, sect. I.4.1.

Works should increase the levels of safety and the degree of accessibility and enhance the typical urban elements while respecting the authenticity of spaces, taking into consideration the compatibility with the original materials and ensuring coherence and harmony between the existing and the new. In all cases, where possible, works should be entrusted to local artisans/artists.

Architectural assets

SECTION I.5.1 – THE KATIU BRIDGE IN BËNJË

Katiu Bridge, listed as a category I Cultural Monument since 1973, is located over the Lengarica River, a tributary of the Vjosa, in a strategic and highly scenic position. It is 6.2 km from the Përmet-Tri Urat SH75 state highway and 13.6 km from Përmet (Figs. I-5.1.1 - I-5.1.3).

The name of the bridge derives from “kadi”, or the local version “kati”, a word that indicated a judge during the Ottoman Empire. The bridge was given its name probably in honour of the person who commissioned it or played an important role in its construction.

The bridge was used in the past by the inhabitants of the area to go from the hill of Bënjë toward the villages of the region of Shqeria and vice-versa. Much of its original importance has been lost and today it is only used by tourists to reach the thermal baths that surround it, or else occasionally by shepherds when they take their flocks to graze in the surrounding hills.

The bridge is part of a system of architectural and landscape elements of great value: the thermal baths, the prehistoric caves and the canyon of Lengarica River are all near it. The ruins of the *Mulliri i Drithit* are located to the south, following the course of the river.

Figure I-5.1.1
View of the Katiu
Bridge before the
restoration works in
1982 showing the
damage suffered by
the left abutment
(looking upstream)
during World War
II. [Courtesy:
Municipality of
Përmet]



Figure I-5.1.2
The downstream
facade of the Katiu
Bridge.



Figure I-5.1.3
View of the Katiu
Bridge and of the
thermal baths.



Historical and typological framework

According to Shtylla (2013), Katiu Bridge belongs to a series of bridges of the same type and period built in various places in Albania. This scholar maintains that the bridge dates back to the mid-18th century, and this hypothesis finds a confirmation based on its similarities with other bridges present in the area (Shtylla, 2013).

The construction of Katiu Bridge thus belongs to a fertile period between the 18th and 19th centuries, during which many religious and civil works were undertaken by order of the Ottoman Empire. Other bridges in the area of Përmet were built in the same period, such as the bridges of Limar, Nivan, or Petran of which unfortunately only fragments remain today.

The bridge consists of a single arch, slightly lowered, with a span of about 15.50 m. In the haunch towards the east bank of the river there is a flood arch of about 2.70 m high and 1.30 m wide. In addition to reducing the loads carried by the structure of the bridge, the flood arch has the main function of easing water flow during floods and consequently reducing the dynamic action on the piles (Shtylla, 2013).

The bridge has no parapet: on top of the arch, some of the voussoirs protrude from the sides of the walking surface. Comparing this bridge with others stone bridge in the area, it can be supposed that these voussoirs originally served as curbstones aimed at preventing carts and animals from sliding while crossing the bridge (Lole, 1998; Kola, 2002; Shtylla, 2013) (Fig. I-5.1.4).

Constructional features

The bridge is built of sedimentary stone (limestone and sandstone with lime mortar joints) following good construction techniques so as to effectively counteract external actions, such as water pressure. The care with which the building was made is recognisable in the abutments, in the construction of the flood arch and in the four transverse steel tie rods with wedges. Steel tie rods used to be inserted into the masonry when still incandescent; during cooling, thanks to the contraction of the iron, they enabled to tightened the structure. This guaranteed an enhanced functioning of tie rods and wall elements (Shtylla, 2013) (Fig. I-5.1.5).

On the left side of the bridge looking downstream, the ruins of a wall of considerable height can be noted, perhaps a part of a construction connected to the bridge. In the bottom part of this wall, the springing portion of an arch ring can be seen. Considering the presence of thermal springs in the immediate proximity of the bridge, a hypothesis may be that these remains are those of a wing wall with an arch, which allowed the water from the spring to flow into the river.



Figure I-5.1.4 – The roadway of the bridge.



Figure I-5.1.5 – A detail of the head of a transverse steel tie rods lacking of wedge.

State of conservation

Katiu Bridge is in fair condition from a structural point of view. The decay of the materials depends not only on natural causes and ageing, but also and mainly on lack of maintenance.

In 1982 the bridge underwent restoration and consolidation work which involved the reconstruction of a portion of the left abutment of the bridge looking upstream. This abutment had been severely damaged by the events that occurred during World War II. The reconstructed portion can be easily distinguished because the quality of the ashlar is very different from the original ones¹ (Fig. I-5.1.6).

A second restoration campaign took place in 2018. It concerned the repair/replacement of missing ashlars in a part of the right abutment looking upstream and the re-pointing of the mortar joints. These works were not properly carried out in terms of material, technique and colour and have a negative impact on the appearance of the bridge (Fig. I-5.1.7).

During the field analysis, the absence of some ashlars was detected, in particular in correspondence of the intrados of the arch and of the right abutment looking downstream. Some spots (chromatic alterations) caused by chemical agents, the presence of some efflorescence and the superficial deposit of biological material were also observed. In some sections, there are traces of invasive vegetation among the ashlars that, if neglected, could further damage the mortar joints and progressively weaken their performance (Fig. I-5.1.8). Given the situation concerning incongruous elements (both structural and formal), it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive action involving the cleaning and restoring of the original material and chromatic features.



Figure I-5.1.6 –
A detail of the
abutment restored
in 1982.

¹ On one of the 'new' ashlars the date "1982" has been carved, exactly as happened in the past when master-builders left their 'signature' on the stone.



Figure I-5.1.7 – A view of the bridge looking upstream showing the restoration work carried out in 2018.

Figure I-5.1.8 – A detail of the arch intrados.

Intervention strategies

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.1 Historical research

The Action aims to build an information framework as comprehensive as possible regarding the period of construction, the materials used and any restoration works that may have taken place.

A.2 Scientific survey of the building

The Action aims to provide a complete survey documentation of the bridge. In addition to the already available laser scanner survey^(a), it would be useful to gather all existing documentation and carry out a comparison of all documented surveys so as to have a chronology of works and obtain full knowledge of the building.

A.3 Preliminary analysis of the building

This Action aims at determining a comprehensive framework, necessary for carrying out any further in-depth analysis, and to identify any possible ongoing structural issues that, if neglected, could worsen and eventually require more complex and expensive works.

It relies on the scheduling and development of technological and structural investigations for the purpose of identifying any possible structural issues and to implement the adequate measures for repairing the damaged and compromised elements.

A.4 Restoration works

Through this action we suggest a series of specific restoration works on the decayed, damaged or incongruous sections of the bridge:

- Replacement of missing ashlars, in particular on the right abutment looking downstream and on the intrados of the arch;
- Replacement, based on the original materials and techniques, of the missing wedges;
- Repointing of the mortar joints on the two sides of the right abutment looking upstream^(b);
- Restoration of the sections of the cobblestones of the bridge which are incongruous with the original appearance;
- Cleaning of the wall facing in the sections affected by the presence and accumulation of alien materials.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Establishing an efficient information and communication system

Establishing an adequate information and communication system, would in the first place, guide the visitors approaching the building from the main roads; and secondly, once on site, would describe the monument and its history in relation to the past events concerning the village and the area.

Historical and technical information can be enriched with the oral stories transmitted by the locals, so as to strengthen the connection with the context and its memory (see A8, chap. I.3).

S7 Management Strategies

A.6 Static monitoring of the bridge

This Action suggests the implementation of an adequate static monitoring of the bridge, even though the preliminary analysis did not reveal any signs of structural problems currently evolving. To this end, it is advisable to plan structural investigations in order to highlight any ongoing problem and eventually envisage measures to restore any damaged or compromised structural elements. The monitoring of the bridge will also allow identification of any failure, movement or settlements that could occur in the future.

A.7 Drafting of a Maintenance Plan of the bridge and of the surrounding area

The aim of this Action is to guarantee the preservation of the beauty of the place and to offer both villagers and visitors the opportunity to use and enjoy an orderly, clean and properly managed space, through the drafting of a *Maintenance Plan* (Caterina & Fiore, 2005).

The plan should establish the various maintenance measures, their periodicity, the workers assigned to carry them out, etc.

The following activities should be specifically provided for:

- Ordinary maintenance of the bridge, with periodical weeding and removal of any biological coating and accumulated materials such as dirt and dust;
- Ordinary maintenance of the area surrounding the bridge, including cleaning, taking care of the greenery and maintenance of any equipment and installations.

A.8 Establishing a surveillance and control system

A single operator who manages the entrance of vehicles and visitors currently regulates access to the area of the bridge during the tourist season.

The Action suggests to strengthen the control system with a second operator in charge of surveilling and controlling the area of the bridge and of the thermal springs and of providing assistance in case of need.

A.9 Enhancing the rubbish collection and disposal service in the thermal area

There are currently some rubbish bins in the thermal area that, especially during the summer, are still insufficient for the proper disposal of the amount of rubbish produced by visitors, and are not emptied with the necessary frequency.

The Action suggests to enhance the rubbish collection and disposal service in the thermal area in order to preserve the natural and aesthetic features of the place and to avoid the dispersion of waste and the resulting damage to the environment.

Notes

- a) A complete survey of the bridge was undertaken in June 2019, during the Analysis Phase of the “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.
- b) The repointing of the mortar joints and the replacement of the missing ashlar in one of the abutments were completed during the last restoration work (2018) undertaken by the Swedish NGO CHwB (Cultural Heritage without Borders) based on the official project of the Institute of the Cultural Monuments drafted in 2015. See <<https://ata.gov.al/2018/09/19/ura-e-katiut-ne-fshatin-benje-i-nenshtrohet-restaurimit/>>.

SECTION I.5.2 – THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION OF MARY IN KOSINË

The Church of the Dormition of Mary is located at the entrance of the village of Kosinë, in a position overlooking the valley of the River Vjosa. It is an isolated landmark surrounded only by a few trees (Fig. I-5.2.1).

The village school is situated in the vast area below it. Until the restoration works of 2017² there was also a low enclosure wall that marked the limits of the church grounds on all sides just like a classical *temenos*.

The church is approximately 7.7 km from Përmet, and can be easily accessed on foot or using means of transportation.

Historical and typological overview

The church of Kosinë is located in an area outside of the inhabited centre and constitutes the fulcrum of an area, which in the past apparently belonged to a monastic complex³. The area surrounding the church still includes ruins and traces of foundations of a series of structures adjacent to the church, which were demolished in the late Seventies⁴.

Archive photographs clearly reveal the presence of a very thick bell gable at a distance of approximately 5-6 m from the entrance to the church, which included a bell-fry⁵. To the south of the bell gable there was another compact structure that exceeded in width the facade of the church, whereas to the north of it there stood a longitudinal structure, which occupied the entire extension of the side of the church⁶ (Fig. I-5.2.2). These additions did not present any particular architectural value and were probably built at different times.

Once all the 'alien' elements have been removed, the clear body of the church remains, which recalls the Byzantine tradition of the period between the Comnenus (1075-1185) and the Palaeologus (1224-1453) dynasties (Stylianou & Stylianou, 1997). The building has been unanimously dated between the 12th and 13th centuries (Meksi, 2016; Thomo, 1998; Meksi, 2004). Vocotopoulos (2003), thanks to his personal interpretation of the inscription on a brick tile of the apse (Popa, 1998)⁷, aligns with this

² Although the restoration works was undertaken in 2017, the project dates back to 2014 (Stratobërdha *et al.*, 2014).

³ This information was provided by the local inhabitants as well as by architect Gentjan Stratobërdha, who is in charge of the restoration and preservation works for the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

⁴ The Technical Report regarding the 1976 restoration work (Frashëri, 1976) records the decision to demolish the structures adjacent to the church. This is also confirmed by the photographs from 1981-82 in which the structures are no longer present.

⁵ The year 1868 was carved on one of the ashlar, probably signalling the year of its construction (Popa, 1998)

⁶ The Technical Report regarding the 1976 restoration work (Frashëri, 1976) specifies that the longitudinal body of the building to the north was used during the Hoxha regime as the village post office. Thus, it cannot be excluded that it may have been built during the first decades of the regime.

⁷ The inscription mentioned by Vocotopoulos is the one published by Popa in the book dedicated to inscriptions in Albanian churches, and was located in a circular brick inserted under the pediment above the apse.



Figure I-5.2.1
View of the church
from the village.



Figure I-5.2.2
The church
before the 1982
restoration
campaign. *Left:*
View from north-
east (with the
added volume still
present). *Right:* The
XIX Century belfry
now demolished.
[Courtesy: NICH]

hypothesis, but furtherly specifies the date of the construction by locating it in the last decade of the 12th century.

From the point of view of the plan composition, the church in Kosinë belongs to the domed cross-in-square typology. However, a slight 'irregularity' is present because of the two small rooms that laterally connect the narthex with the naos. These belong to the narthex from a spatial point of view, thus breaking the cross-in-square scheme in the western part of the church. The arms of the cross are not equal: those with an

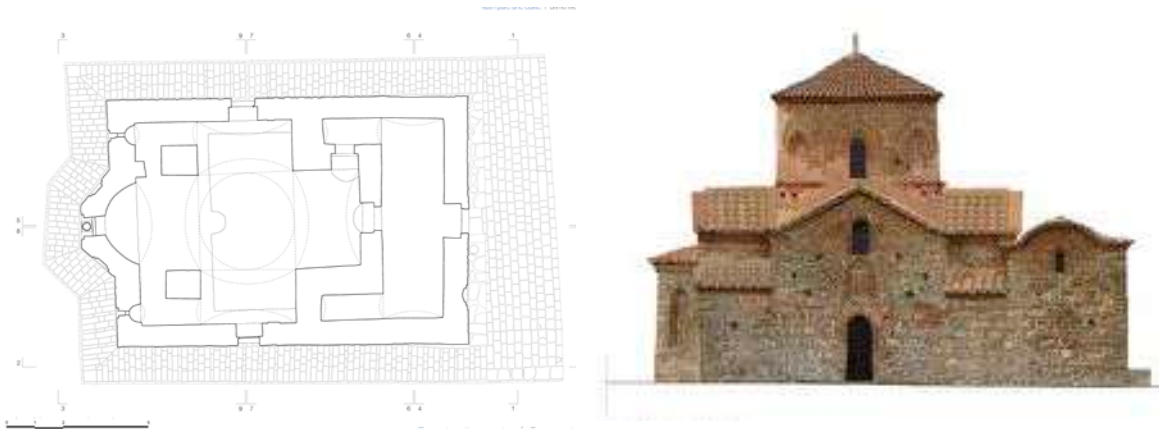


Figure I-5.2.3 east-west direction are slightly longer than those with a north-south direction. This somehow strengthens the hypothesis that the church belonged to an archaic period of Byzantine architecture.

Left: Floor plan of the church. Right: Photoplan of the north facade.

In the central section of the cross there are four pendentives on which stands the drum of the semi-spherical dome. The apse confirms the general trend of small rural Byzantine churches and presents a concave semi-cylindrical surface on the inside and polygonal on the outside (Meksi, 2004).

The entrance to the church is located on the western side, through the narthex that conducts into the naos. In addition to the main entrance, it is possible to enter the church also through two secondary doors located on the north and south facades. These two entrances, which had previously been walled, were re-opened in 2014 (Stratobërdha *et al.*, 2014) (Fig. I-5.2.3).

Constructional features

The Church of the Dormition of Mary is made of stone and bricks. From the restoration reports (1982; 2014) and from the meetings held with Albanian scholars involved with the church⁸, it was made clear that the stone used for its construction is local, whereas there is no information regarding the origin of the bricks.

The masonry is not regular and the stone elements vary in size. On the external walls, a *cloisonné* masonry technique can be found. In addition to the decorative aspect, this technique also has a structural purpose. In fact, this solution – which commonly uses irregular stone blocks – defines constructive sub-units (or macro-blocks), that are more stable from a mechanic point of view⁹ (Fig. I-5.2.4).

In 1982, the external plaster was removed¹⁰. It is probable that after the removal of the plaster, some parts of the masonry were improperly restored, since the technique of setting the stone elements is not extended to the whole wall surface, but only to some portions. It is thus possible to suppose that the sections where *cloisonné* masonry is now present are the result of the various restoration works carried out since 1982, and

⁸ Meetings took place on 3/8/2019 and 6/8/2019, respectively, with professors Pirro Thomo and Aleksandër Meksi.

⁹ On the use of *cloisonné* in South-East Europe, see Reusche, 1971.

¹⁰ According to professor Meksi the church was not originally plastered, thus justifying the decision to recover the original *facies* of the church.

therefore do not necessarily belong to the original masonry. These operations demonstrate the evident will of the restorers to align the church of Kosinë with the dominant Byzantine church model.

The roof of the church consists of a wooden structure; over time both the geometry and the roof covering have been modified. The previous covering of split stone slabs was replaced (in 1982) with a covering of brick tiles. It is not possible to say with certainty whether the original roof of the late 12th century had a brick or stone covering¹¹ (Figs. I-5.2.5 and I-5.2.6).

State of conservation

Structurally the church is in good condition. It should however be recalled that for many decades (especially during the years of the Communist regime) it was in a state of abandonment and neglect that caused a number of problems to the building elements and to the interior decorations (Fig. I-5.2.7).

The most important recent restoration work was carried out in 2017 (based on a project drafted in 2014). It involved the walls, the repointing of mortar joints, the construction of a drain channel around the perimeter of the church, the reconstruction of the roof covering and the waterproofing of the roof¹². Unfortunately, the problem concerning water leaks has not yet been fully solved.

The National Institute of Cultural Heritage (NICH) recently approved the restoration of the wall paintings (Vokopola, 2019). Prior to this, problem of water leaks through the roof, as well as of the rising damp that still affects the northern and eastern walls of the church, should be solved.



Figure I-5.2.4 – Detail of the north facade of the church with the cloisonné and other decoration techniques.

¹¹ Stone slab roof covering was also found in other churches in the area between Gjirokastër and Korça, such as, for example, the churches of Labovë e Kryqit and of Ristozë in Mborje.

¹² According to the restoration project (2014) a type of mortar called *horasan* was used on the extrados, as well as on the joints and as plaster. This type of mortar is made of ground bricks (*chamotte*) and lime in a 1:1 ratio.

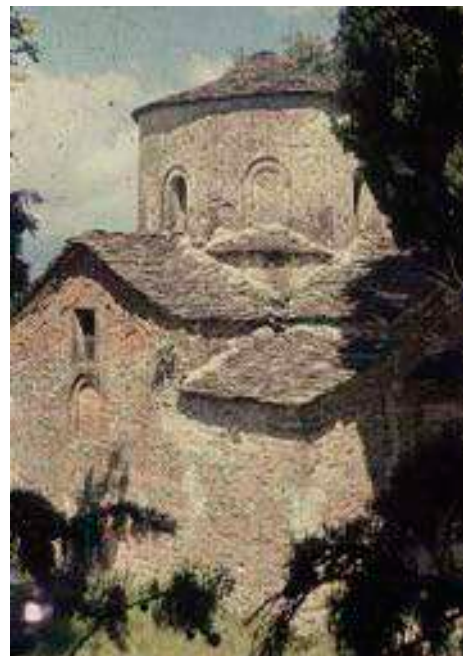


Figure I-5.2.5 – Views of the church before the 1982 restoration campaign. [Courtesy: Pirro Thomo]



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7

Figure I.5.2.6 – Detail of the roof of the apsidal pediment and of the drum.

Figure I-5.2.7 – View from below of the drum and cupola with the Christ Pantocrator.

Intervention strategies

S3 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.1 Historical research

The Actions aims at gathering all the available information regarding the historical knowledge of the church, its furnishings (including the iconostasis and its icons), as well as the structures which were previously located in the surrounding area. Special attention must be given to the wall paintings inside the church that are partially covered by other paintings or plasters.

State institutions and the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church will be the primary sources for obtaining the necessary documentation, but also oral evidence from the locals and any documents found in Kosinë (such as period photographs) may be useful for the purposes of historical research.

A.2 Scientific survey of the building

See A.2, sect. I.S.1.

A.3 Preliminary analysis of the building

See A.3, sect. I.S.1

A.4 Restoration works

The following works are aimed at opposing the main causes of decay and to halt any existing deficiencies. These works must be consistent with international restoration principles and standards^(a).

ROOF WATERPROOFING

Despite the restoration works, there are still signs of run-off and a high percentage of humidity inside the church. Roof waterproofing is pivotal for the preservation of the building and the safeguarding of the wall paintings. The works must be preceded by investigations aimed at identifying and accurately locating the necessary works to be undertaken.

WALL DAMP PROOFING

This mostly concerns some sections of the walls to the north and east. It is necessary to intervene resolutely so as to completely eliminate a problem which could irreversibly damage the wall paintings, which are already affected by efflorescence. The assessment and management of surface waters should also be provided for.

RESTORATION OF WALL PAINTINGS

The restoration of wall paintings, already programmed, must be carried out after the completion of the works described above. In addition to addressing the various factors of decay that affect the wall paintings, it is necessary to intervene to remove the layers of paint and plaster that cover the original paintings.

RESTORATION OF THE ICONOSTASIS AND DECORATIONS

From the documentation obtained from the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (NICH), it appears that before the 2017 restoration campaign there was an iconostasis inside the church. There is no information today concerning the whereabouts of the iconostasis and its icons.

Through the collaboration with the religious authorities, an attempt may be made to return the icons to their original location and to rebuild the iconostasis. An assessment must be made, from both an operative and methodological point of view, whether to order the lost icons from iconographers specialised in the reproduction of ancient icons in accordance with ancient painting techniques and Byzantine iconographic regulations. In order to obtain the necessary resources for the restoration of the iconostasis and the possible remake of the icons, a crowd-funding operation could be undertaken, addressed especially to the villagers who have migrated abroad.

IMPROVING TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Align the lighting system with European standards and implement solutions to render it suitable to the environment in which it is set.

Considering the location of the church (isolated and on the top of a hillock), it is important to provide for the placement of an efficient protection system against atmospheric discharges which, however, does not alter the appearance and architectural features of the building.

With the purpose of enhancing safety and security in the church fire protection, video surveillance, and intruder alarm systems should be installed.

S4 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Establishing an efficient information and communication system

See A.5 sect. I.S.1

A.6 Drafting a project for the environmental regeneration of the area surrounding the church

Through this Action we seek to bring more attention towards the landscape values of the area as an essential aspect of the proposed architectural works, which should therefore enhance the current landscape context. The materials used and the forms of the paths and of any specific equipment must have a low visual impact and fully respect natural materials and the natural features of the place.

The environmental regeneration project should provide for the following works:

ASSESSMENT AND CRITICAL RECOVERY OF THE TRACES OF BUILDINGS DEMOLISHED AROUND THE CHURCH

The traces of demolished structures must be assessed primarily from the point of view of their meaning and historical value. This will be followed by the selection of the most significant testimonials to be highlighted and integrated within the design process^(b).

DESIGNING A PATHWAYS SYSTEM

It will be necessary to set paved paths that, in addition to enhancing accessibility to the church and the surrounding area, connect the church to the school and to the bordering green area, so as to establish new paths and activate new opportunities for social interaction and leisure for both villagers and tourists.

MAINTENANCE OF GREEN AREAS

The project must intervene with care on the natural layout of the terrain, establishing green areas for carrying out social and cultural activities (see A.8), and planting autochthonous trees and shrubs species so as not to modify the natural appearance and configuration of the place.

ENHANCEMENT OF THE NATURAL SCENIC VIEWPOINT OVER THE VJOSA VALLEY

See A.11, chap. I.3.

PLACEMENT OF STREET FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT

The project must provide for appropriate equipment such as benches, rest areas, rubbish bins, etc.

INSTALLATION OF AN EXTERNAL LIGHTING SYSTEM

The project should include an adequate illumination of the exterior areas in order to ensure a greater and safer usability at night. This will also allow to highlight the architectural features of the church fostering its visibility also during the night, both from the village and from the road to Përmet.

For a project based on the measures envisaged in this Action see Fig. I-5.2.8.

A.7 Enhancing the role of the church as both a community and tourist resource

This Action aims to obtain the opening of the church at least some days per week^(c).

With the authorisation of the priest, the inhabitants of the village could, voluntarily and taking turns, offer to dedicate some hours per week to welcoming visitors and providing surveillance.

Tourists could be charged with an entrance fee in order to provide for cleaning and maintenance of the church, as well as to ensure a small wage for the custodians.

A.8 Promoting cultural and social activities in the area surrounding the church

The aim of the Action is to use the vast green area surrounding the church (characterised by many virtues such as a dominant position overlooking the Vjosa Valley, the proximity to the road and to the village, etc.), for housing cultural and social activities in line with the sacredness of the place, such as concerts of iso-polyphonic music and theatre or traditional dance performances (see Fig. I.5.2.8).

S7 Management Strategies

A.9 Static Monitoring of the church

See A.6, sect. I.5.1.

A.10 Drafting of a Maintenance Plan of the church and of the surrounding area

See A.7, sect. I.5.1.

Once established, the plan could be implemented by the villagers themselves, through voluntary work at the service of the community which would cover the simpler and less strenuous tasks.

Notes

- a) Venice Charter (1964), arts. 9, 11, and 12, and subsequently Conventions and Declarations.
- b) In the past, next to the church there was an enclosure consisting of a stone wall approximately 1 metre high. There are currently four trees on site, one at each corner of the former enclosure.
- c) Access currently depends on the availability of the priest, who personally opens the church and also keeps the keys.

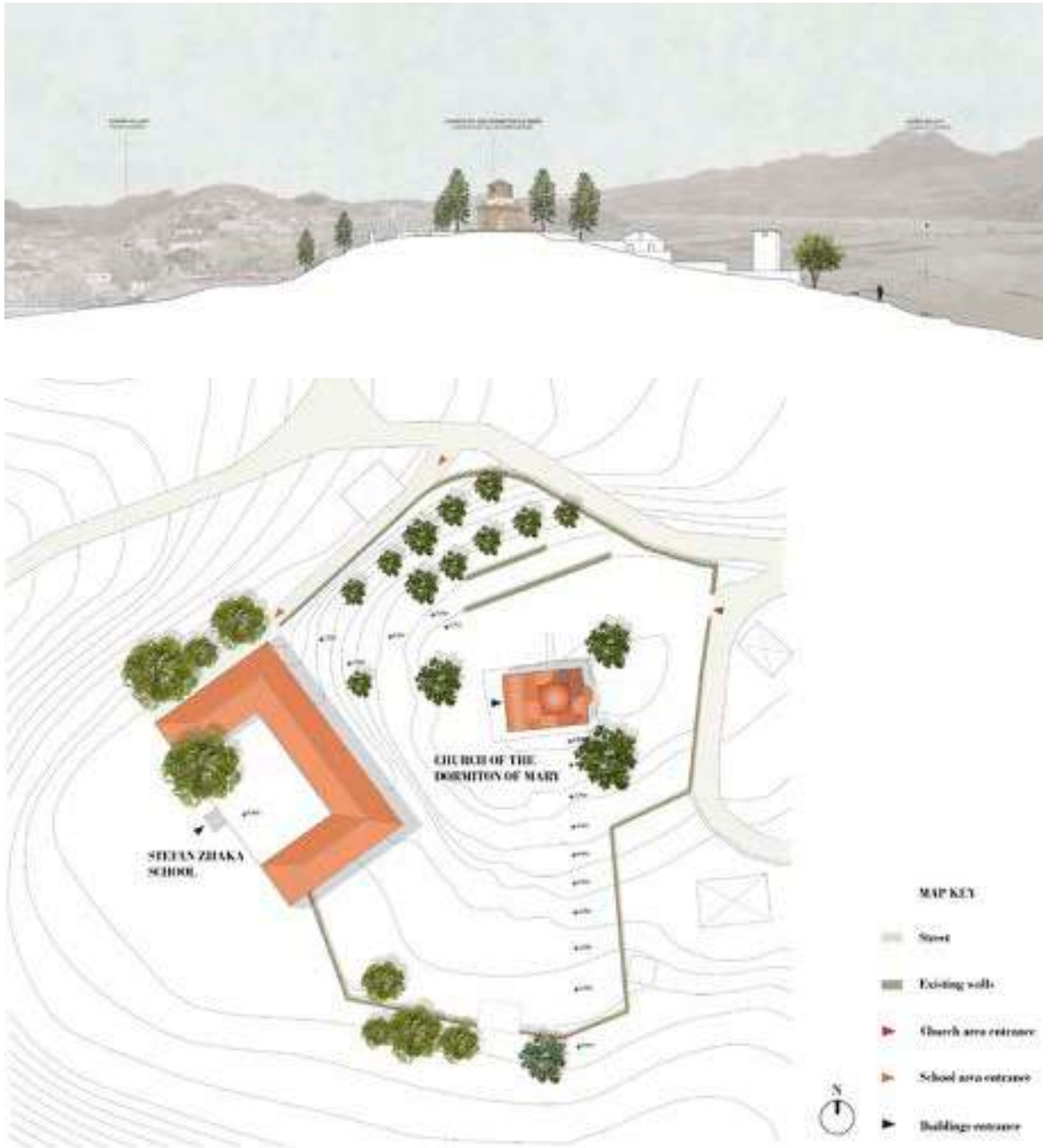
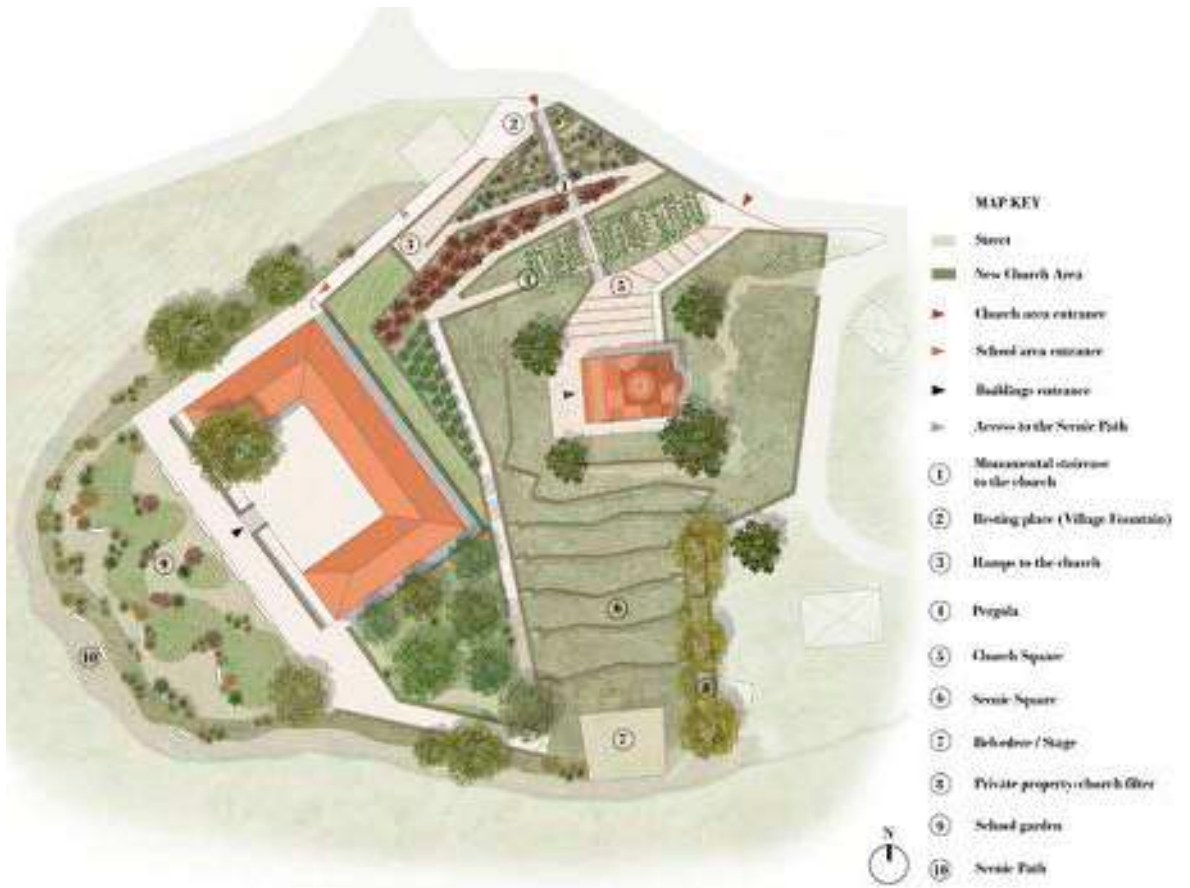


Figure I-5.2.8 – Redevelopment project of the area around the church of Kosinë. *Above:* Environmental section and plan of the current situation. *Opposite page. Above:* Masterplan of the project proposal. The project – designed by Samuela Hidri – aims to achieve the following goals: (1) guarantee a better accessibility for everyone to the area of the Church and the village school by introducing a new system of ramps and stairs; (2) enhance local materials and techniques; (3) recover the traditional gathering places in the village like the ‘village fountain’; (4) provide new functional opportunities (for instance a small open-air theatre); (5) enrich the vegetation through an educational garden made of local aromatic and medical plants, a small planting of local fruit trees and spontaneous shrubbery and a new garden in the school yard; (6) design new scenic paths and views on the Vjosa Valley. *Below:* Renderings of the Pergola (left) and the Scenic square (right).



SECTION I.5.3 – THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION OF MARY IN LEUSË

The Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë is a historical monument of exceptional beauty located in a remarkable landscape, which overlooks the Vjosa Valley (Fig. I-5.3.1). The church is situated to the east of the village, near the road that connects Leusë to Përmet. It stands on a slope that descends toward the river, taking advantage of the natural acclivity of the hill.

The church is located within an area enclosed by a stone wall, and stands in a lower position than the entrance by the road. A curved staircase paved with stone slabs overcomes this height difference. This area includes, in addition to the church, a small cemetery (located on the northern and western sides) and two specimens of *cupressus sempervirens*, listed as Natural Monuments and which, due to their height (20 m) and the regularity of their crown, are quite impressive.

What is striking about the cemetery is the evident disparity between the ancient tombs and the newer ones. Whereas the former are characterised by a uniformity and sobriety of materials and forms, in the latter the design, as well as the size and the type of materials, are used for exhibiting the affluence of the family, or else for depicting the tragic death of the deceased, thus generating a disquieting effect, in strong contrast with the ‘composed’ nature of the place¹³.

Historical and typological overview

The church of Leusë falls within the general category of post-Byzantine Albanian churches. As far as the construction year is concerned, the most certain evidence is found in the founding inscription (Rembeci, 2006) on the entrance gateway, which says: “It was built from its foundations and painted, this honoured and divine temple of our most holy and venerated Lady, the Mother of God from Eleusa¹⁴ with the contribution in terms of effort and expenses of the devout Christians of this village¹⁵, known as Leusë which was saved by the Lord at the time when his grace monsignor Joasaf of Agraфа was bishop of the diocese of Korça and Përmet [two lines were cancelled]. By the hands of the painters Michael, George and George of Fjonjati, in the year of salvation 1812, April 18th¹⁶.”

Two other dates were found, however, in two icons of the iconostasis (which today are probably kept at the Museum of Mediaeval Art in Korça). The first (1778) on the icon of John the Baptist, and the second (1764) on the silver frame of the icon of the Virgin (Popa, 1998). The two dates on the icons led some scholars (Thomo *et al.*, 1999; Thomo & Stratobërdha, 2005) to doubt the dating on the founding inscription and to consider that the church was built during the sixth decade of the 18th century instead. In truth, there are no valid motives for considering that the date of 1812 is incorrect. The comparisons with similar inscriptions in other churches of the area¹⁷ demonstrate the will to leave behind a trustworthy historical testimony. The two 18th century dates

¹³ This phenomenon is typical of the past few decades in other parts of Albania as well.

¹⁴ Leusë takes its name from the Greek word “Eleusa”, which means “merciful”. “Virgin Eleusa” is also one of the names of Mary in the Orthodox tradition.

¹⁵ In the Greek version the word “κώμης” is used, generally referring to a somewhat large settlement, equivalent to a small city.

¹⁶ Free translation of the Albanian version in Popa (1998: 193). The original inscription is in Greek.

¹⁷ Consider, for example, the Church of Saint Nicholas in Voskopojë, a village near Korça and Përmet, which specifies both the year of construction and the year in which the frescos were painted.



Figure I-5.3.1
View of the church
almost hidden by
the vegetation.

on the icons might simply testify their belonging to the iconostasis of a previous building that existed where the present church now stands.

There are in fact traces of a previous church in the pavement of the current building, which were revealed during the last restoration work (1999). These consist of a base and of part of the shaft of a column, which is misaligned with the line of columns of the current church¹⁸.

The iconostasis has always represented an element of great worth for the church (Fig. I-5.3.2). The finely carved doors were presented at an exhibition in Paris during the Fifties and generated great interest. After the closure of the exhibition, it seems that they were taken to the National Museum in Tirana, but there is no proof of this. What is certain instead is that they never returned to Leusë (Mihali, 2018). Other wooden elements were violently torn off during the heyday of the Communist regime's declared atheism and, unfortunately later as a result of vandalism, which was widespread in rural areas. What can be seen today is an incomplete work of art waiting to be restored¹⁹. The icons were transferred to the Museum of Mediaeval Art of Korça (as is the case of a great many icons from orthodox churches in Albania), as a result of precise instructions issued by the government in the early Eighties (Mihali, 2018)²⁰. There is no certainty, however, that all the icons are in Korça. It is possible that some may have been lost.

¹⁸ Given the high degree of seismic hazard of the area, it cannot be excluded that the old church collapsed due to an earthquake, as the anti-seismic devices present in the current building would seem to confirm.

¹⁹ Many fragments taken from the iconostasis are now piled up in the narthex of the church.

²⁰ Niko Mihali, who at the time worked for the Governmental Section for Education and Culture, affirms that most of the icons of the churches in Përmet's area were transferred to Korça, but does not specify the final destination of the icons taken from the Leusë iconostasis.



Figure I-5.3.2
View of the carved wooden iconostasis of the church. Significant portions of it have been removed or seriously damaged.

We know from the founding inscription that the church was built thanks to the financial contribution of the families from the village. According to an oral testimony obtained during the field analysis²¹, the construction was supported also by contributions from migrants who at that time already represented a large part of the population. This is an important fact that calls a reflection on the role played by emigration in the development of Albanian society from the late 18th century and throughout the whole 19th century (see Prifti, 2002). Remittances from emigrants were often invested in the construction of churches, used to demonstrate the strong link between the inhabitants and their homeland, finding in the religious building a symbolic representation of their sense of belonging.

An evocative example of this link between the inhabitants of the village and the church is a pencil inscription near the main portal of the church, which says: “Leusa e bukur u dogj krejt nga ushtria naziste barbare, datë 12-6-1944, Kujtim nga [?] Vasil dhe [?]” (“Beautiful Leusë was burned to the ground by the barbarian Nazi army, dated 12-6-1944, Remembrance of [?] Vasil and [?]”). This shows the affection of the inhabitants for their village, their love for “beautiful Leusë”, as well as the wish to leave

²¹ There are no documents to prove the economic contribution of emigrants in the construction of the church. Yet this information – provided by Mr. Aleks Todhe, local representative of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage – seems more than plausible, considering the extent of emigration from the rural areas of the south-east of Albania during the 19th century.

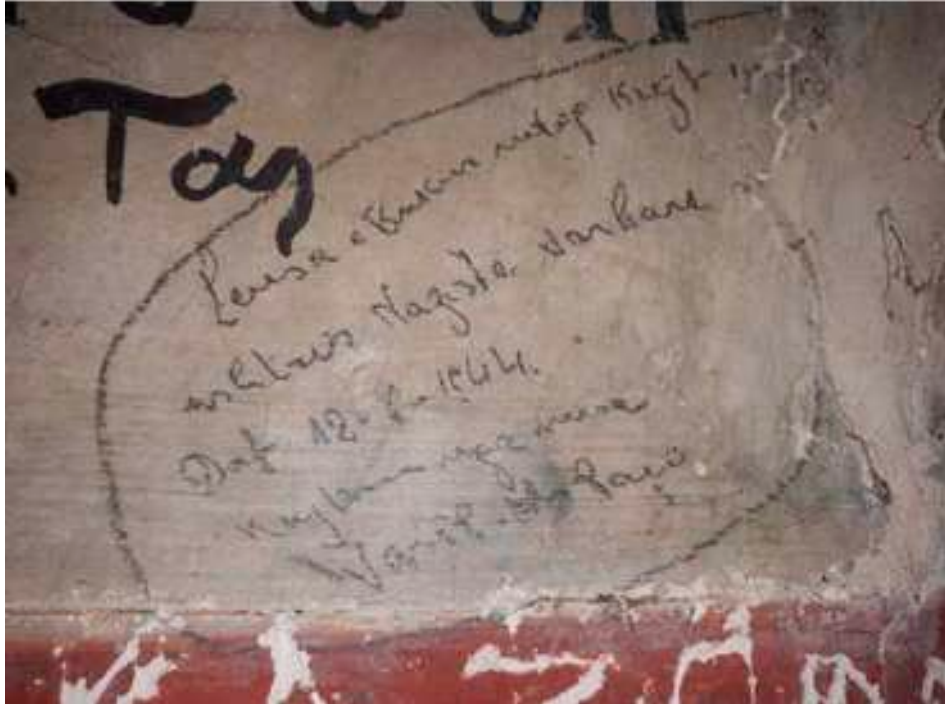


Figure I-5.3.3
A pencil inscription that narrates a pivotal moment of the life of the church and its village during World War II.

a testimony for future generations of the dramatic event that took place during World War II (Fig. I-5.3.3).

The church of Leusë belongs to the three-naved basilica typology, with a barrel-vault on the main nave and cupolas on the lateral ones²² (Figs. I-5.3.4 and I-5.3.5). The canonical architectural units are clearly evident: the naos, the bema, the narthex on the western side and the portico on the northern side. The narthex rises on two levels: the first level is a few steps higher than the pavement of the naos, whereas a timber staircase reaches the second. On the upper level of the narthex is the *matroneum* – the “*gyneconitis*” of the Orthodox tradition, a term usually used in the Vitruvian lexicon to identify spaces reserved for women in the Greek house. Another small structure that was also added to the south of the church, which serves as an ossuary.

The portico, with eight arches and stone columns, is located along the north side of the church (Fig. I-5.3.6). The lack of masonry continuity between the church and the portico – visible both in the assessments of the building and in the surveys illustrated in the restoration project report (Thomo *et al.*, 1999) – seem to suggest a subsequent addition²³. The construction, however, must not have taken place much later, considering the stylistic coherence between the wall paintings on the facade (to which the portico is attached) and those on the inside.

²² Thomo (1998) has extensively addressed the analysis of post-Byzantine church typologies in Albania.

²³ This hypothesis is furtherly supported by the comparison with the plans of other post-Byzantine churches made by Meksi & Thomo (1981, tab. V) where the portico, marked by a different tracing, is systematically indicated as a section added subsequently to the main building of the church. See, *inter alia*, the Church of Good Friday in Përmet, the Church of Saint Nicholas in Lipë (a village in Përmet), as well as some churches in Berat and Gjirokastrë.

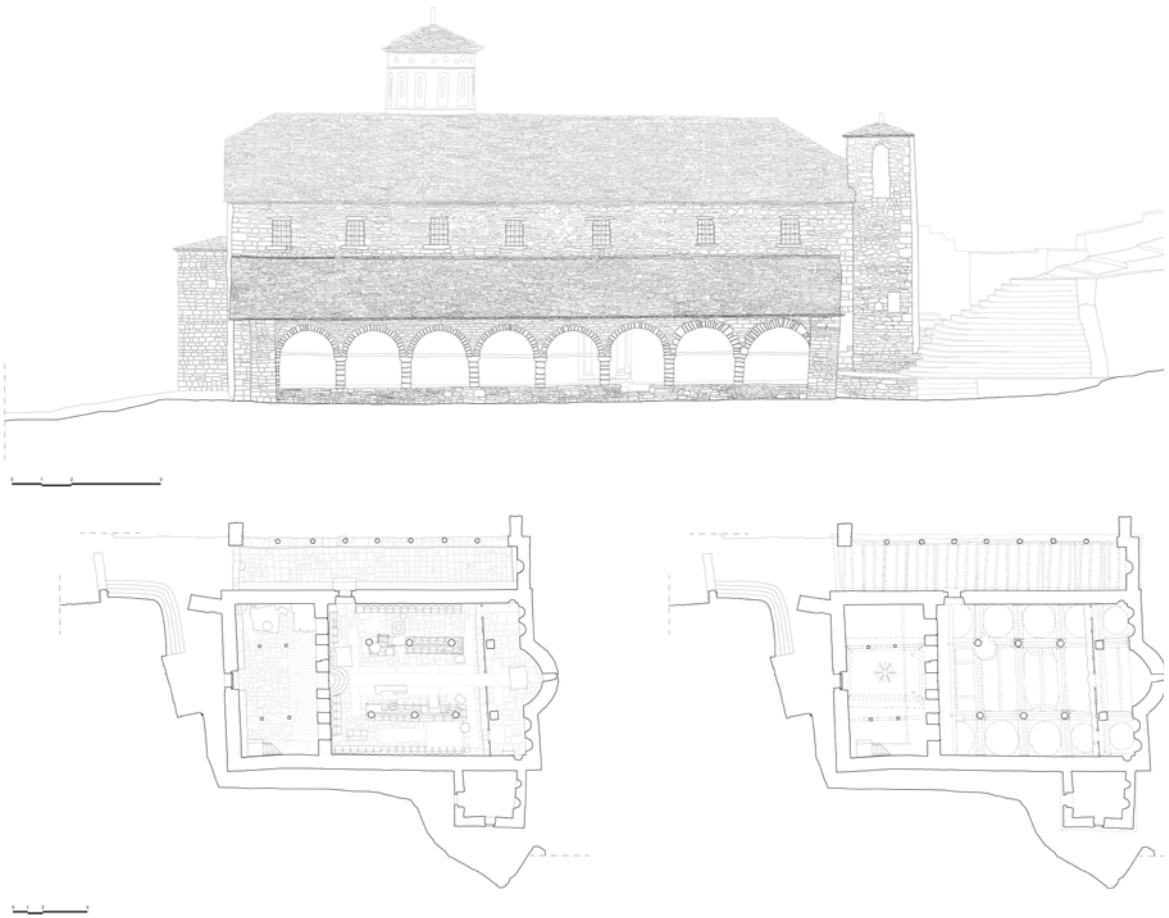


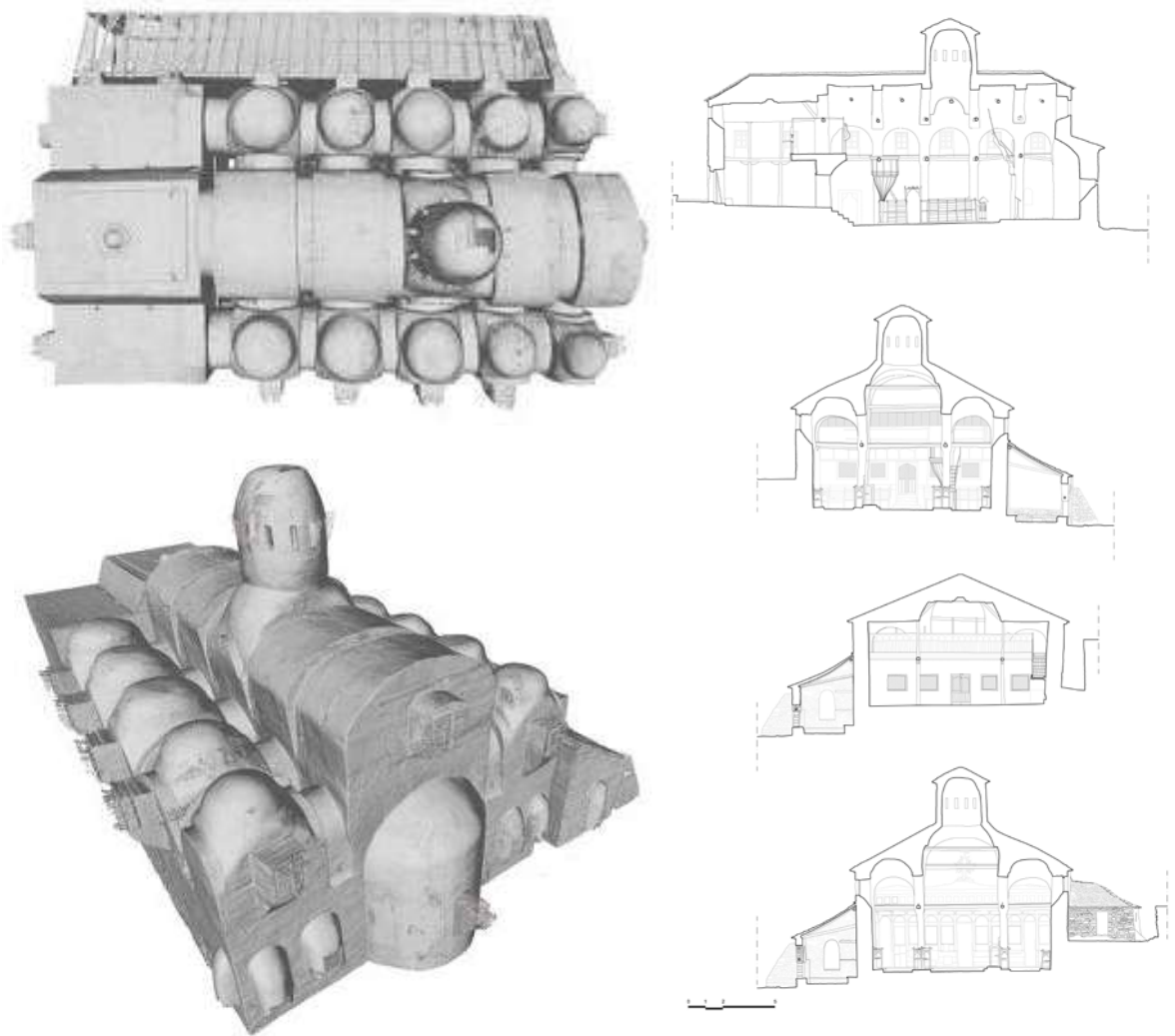
Figure I-5.3.4
 Above: North
 facade of the
 church. Below:
 Plans.

The main entrance to the church is through the portico, which opens directly onto the naos, the main and most representative space of the church. The entrance is off-centre with respect to the interior, as is typical in Orthodox churches in the South of Albania.

The church can also be entered from a secondary access on the western side, which opens onto the narthex. The stone portal of the main entrance is shaped as a trefoil arch, a very widespread element in Mediaeval architecture, both in the West and in the Byzantine area, and re-proposed here in a version which probably also has some Islamic influence. Its particularity lies in the use of a monolithic block rather than the usual voussoirs for the construction of the arch²⁴; a solution that is also found in other religious buildings in the area, such as for example the Church of St. Mary in Bënjë. Above the trefoil arch, there are three blind arches, a typical decorative pattern of the Byzantine tradition (see Ćurčić, 2010 and chap. III.5), which in Leusë hosts the scene of the Dormition of Mary (Fig. I-5.3.7).

Wall paintings entirely cover the interior of the church (Fig. I-5.3.8). The subject matters come from both the Old and New Testament, as well as from the lives of the

²⁴ This structure actually works as a lintel. It is therefore, to all intents and purposes, a lintel shaped as a “three-lobed arch”. It was chosen to keep the term “arch” in the description because the solution reflects the evident will of the builders to show an arch rather than a lintel.



saints, of Jesus Christ and of the Virgin Mary. The latter two are usually represented larger than the former. The scenes are enhanced with vegetal motifs, cartouches and expressive and very dynamic narrative elements, which derive from the influence of Western Baroque art (Vocotopoulos, 2006)²⁵. The paintings are also on the outside, on the portion of the facade covered by the portico. These paintings are more difficult to appreciate due to decay, but also and mainly to vandalism from people solely concerned with leaving a trace of their presence. Paradoxically, although these acts of vandalism caused serious damage to the paintings, they also turned into a proper narrative, a sort of ‘historical document’ with an anthropological value.

Figure I-5.3.5 –
Left: 3D views of
the church. Right:
Sections.

²⁵ The apse and the small cupola of one of the bays next to it present paintings of poor quality, against a homogenous blue background and without the structure and richness of details that characterises the rest. It is a later intervention (the date 1896 is inscribed in the area of the apse), fortunately limited to a small section of the interior surface.



Figure I-5.3.6
The portico of the
church.

Constructional features

The building was constructed using local materials. The vertical load-bearing structure is in masonry with a three-leaf wall that is approximately 90 cm thick. The two external leaves (wythes) are made up in a coursed irregular stone masonry (Fig. I-5.3.9). The stone blocks (of sandstone and limestone) are held together with lime mortar. In order to ensure a better bonding/anchoring between orthogonal walls, stones used as quoins are considerably larger than those used on the rest of the wall. Inside the wall, there are timber elements, which probably have the function of enhancing the response of the building to seismic actions. Probably they are part of a traditional system consisting of a couple of longitudinal timber joists connected at regular intervals with smaller transversal elements²⁶. This timber frame is repeated at regular intervals in height (approximately 80-100 cm).

The perimeter walls continue underground to a depth of approximately 130 cm with stone foundations that have the same thickness as the wall. The columns originally stood on the ground at the same level as the perimeter walls and were supported by a masonry base.

The church has a half hipped roof, a result of the combination between a gable roof and a truncated hip roof. This solution, unlike the classic hip roof, allows for the creation of high windows in order to better illuminate the bema on the eastern side and the matroneum to the west (Fig. I-5.3.10).

²⁶ The distribution of timber elements is a hypothesis developed based on comparisons with other similar structures involving field observations as well as on information provided by prof. Pirro Thomo, designer of the restoration work carried out in 1999.



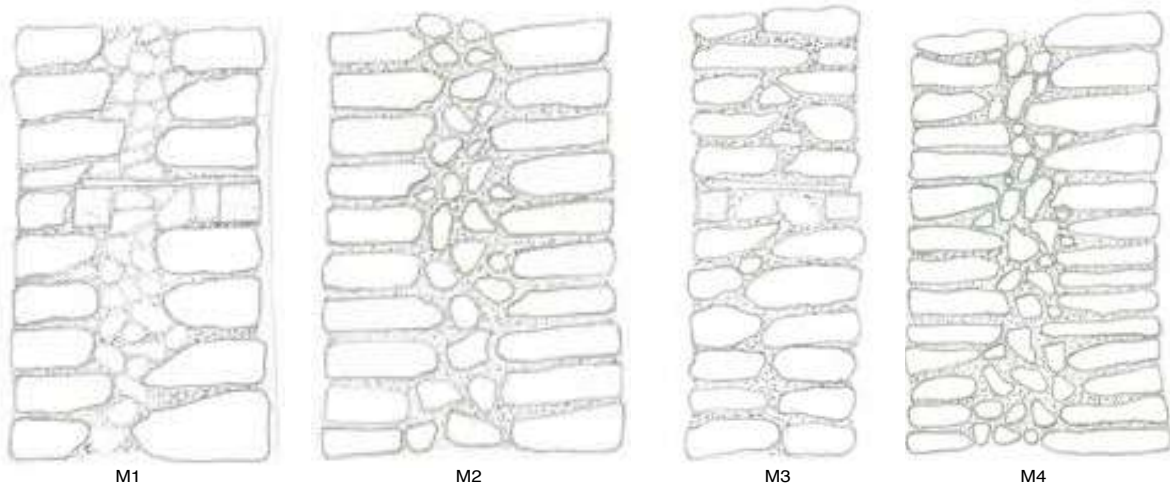
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Figure I-5.3.7 – *Left*: The trefoil arch of the entrance. *Right*: The representation of the Dormition of Mary, which surmount the arch.

Figure I-5.3.8 – *Left*: The outstanding wall paintings of the interior of the church. *Right*: Graffiti on the wall paintings on the portion of the facade under the portico.



9



10

Figure I-5.3.9 – Purely indicative sketches of plausible masonry arrangements exhibiting a mechanical behaviour comparable to that of the real masonry typologies.

From left to right: M1: perimeter walls of the church, three-leaf masonry with inner core and timber laces. M2: masonry of the footing system of the church, three-leaf masonry (with inner core but without reinforcement) made of more regular and better accommodated stone blocks. M3: masonry of the charnel house, two-leaf stone masonry with smaller blocks than the M1 typology and with timber reinforcement elements. M4: masonry of the lower part of the bell tower, three-leaf stone masonry with rather big blocks but no timber elements. [Drawings by Giulia Misseri]

Figure I-5.3.10 – View of the roof of the church and its stone slabs covering.

A similar roof is found in the church of Bënjë (also from the 19th century) and in other churches in the area of Voskopojë (a town near Korça), where the most significant examples of post-Byzantine religious architecture in the region can be found.

The area where the church and the small cemetery are located is surrounded by a dry stone retaining wall; during the 1999 restoration work, upstream and downstream the church, some sections of reinforced concrete retain wall, camouflaged by stone cladding, were built.

Beyond the wall on the southern side, there is a system for the collection and channelling of rainwater, consisting in small canals, made with stones, whose purpose is to conduct the water that washes away along the slope of the church into the two streams located to the east and west. This hydraulic system, essential to the preservation of the church, is not currently working.

State of conservation

As mentioned earlier, in 1999 the church underwent a general restoration/consolidation work that concerned all the structural elements of the building, from the foundations to the roof. Before the restoration, the building was in a very poor state of conservation, and without the said work, it is probable that the church would have been irreparably lost.

As shown in the restoration project report (Thomo *et al.*, 1999), the consolidation work of the foundations consisted in the creation of a grid of reinforced concrete beams that connects the base of the columns with portions, also reinforced, of the foundations of the perimeter walls. This work was necessary because from the crack pattern analysis prior to the consolidation works, the building was seen to be affected by a series of fractures extending along the entire longitudinal axis (from the narthex to the apse). These fractures had produced visible rotations of the column bases and the slippage from the walls of the wooden tie rods of the arches.

The damage phenomenon described is due to the particular geological conformation of the soil on which the building stands. From the geological analyses carried out before the restoration work, it emerged that the church is located above two formations – flysch and breccia – that overlap almost on the longitudinal axis of the building. In particular, the flysch formation has shown a marked vulnerability towards the suffusion phenomenon that induces a very evident settlement.

Other consolidation works concerned the straightening of the columns, the construction of new steel tie rods above those in timber that were no longer efficient and crack repairing in the vaulted structures and walls.

From a site survey carried out in June 2019 by a team of the University of Florence, it appears that the restoration work concentrating on the foundations did not completely solve the problems caused by the settlement of the ground. Some settlement effects can be still detected analysing the crack pattern of the church floor as well as in the detachments of the walls of the buttresses next to the portico and in the reopening of the lesions in the arches of the portico itself.

This analysis, as well as the interviews with experts, have highlighted the necessity to carry out additional investigations and monitoring activities to deepen available knowledge on the geological setting of the site and the related geotechnical hazards, and thus to identify the possible actions to be undertaken in order to preserve the building (see Misseri *et al.*, 2020).



Figure I-5.3.11
Severe damage on
the south wall of
the church due to
the rising damp.

Key among these actions is repairing the hydraulic system in the southern part of the building, in order to make it fully operational²⁷. The lack of maintenance caused vegetation to obstruct the canals, thus impeding them from carrying out their important function of containing and channelling toward the stream to the east of the church the great amount of water that flows down the slope. This water has also caused serious damage to the wall paintings on the southern wall of the church, especially before the restoration in 1999. Rising damp has brought about the swelling of the longitudinal timber elements present in the masonry, thus causing the detachment of plaster and consequently of the paintings²⁸ (Fig. I-5.3.11).

²⁷ This is also the opinion of Professor Luljeta Bozo, author of the geological report annexed to the restoration project of January 1999 (see Thomo *et al.*, 1999) (Interview given on February 2020). See also Bozo (2002).

²⁸ During the 1999 restoration campaign, a work was carried out on the wall paintings that was somewhat questionable from the point of view of their conservation, but perhaps the only possible one at the time to safeguard them.

Intervention strategies

S3 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.1 Historical research

See A.1, sect. I.5.1.

Of specific importance in the case of Leusë is the reconstruction of the seismic history of the area, together with an in-depth analysis of the iconographic themes present in the wall paintings that completely cover the interior walls of the church and the northern wall under the portico.

A.2 Scientific survey of the building

See A.2, sect. I.5.1.

A.3 Preliminary analysis of the building

See A.3, sect. I.5.1.

A.4 Extremely urgent works

Through this Action we seek to bring the attention towards several urgent issues regarding the church. Specifically, the following works are proposed:

MONITORING OF THE SOIL AND THE BUILDING

The church stands on the border between two geological formations: breccia and flysch; the latter is particularly vulnerable to deformation phenomena. The border between these two formations also coincides with the longitudinal axis of the church. The geological study carried out prior to the restoration work in 1999 highlighted that the formation of the flysch shows a strong tendency to suffusion and presents extremely weak mechanical parameters, i.e. cohesion and internal friction angle.

Furthermore, crack pattern analysis shows, in addition to the effects due to the thrusts of the arches and the vaults, also a picture of the damage attributable to a particularly serious differential failure. Besides, some lesions, for example those located near the dome drum, although they have been mended, are unequivocally attributable to the effects of a seismic event.

Due to all of these reasons, it is considered urgent to start a monitoring plan for the church and the soil. In particular, it is deemed necessary to carry out further geological investigations (collection of any existing documentation and specific studies on the area) to evaluate the presence or absence of phenomena in progress and their speed in evolution, as well as the effects, both static and dynamic, on vertical structures and vaulted elements, so as to define which works to carry out.

A first step in this direction has been made by our team, as is shown in the Figs. I-5.3.12 and I-5.3.13.

WORKS FOR OPPOSING WATER-RELATED DECAY OF THE BUILDING

The drainage canals above the building are completely obstructed by vegetation and earth and are therefore completely ineffective for channelling water that flows along the slope toward the stream that runs on the south-eastern side of the church. This situation probably contributes to the rinsing of the terrain speeding the suffusion phenomena. Furthermore, it allows rainwater to become stagnant at the base of the masonry, in particular on the southern wall, generating a great amount of rising damp that damages the wall paintings.

It is crucial to prepare a plan for regulating the flow of surface water involving both the areas above and around the church, as well as an efficient system for the collection and disposal of rainwater that flows down from the roof.

It is also important to assess the possible role of the road that passes above the church, in cases of heavy rainfall. The long section of wall that protects and separates the church from the adjacent stream, which continues upward until reaching the road, must be cleaned of all shrub vegetation. The same should be done for stream banks.

In order to reduce the rising damp phenomenon it is necessary to check the drainage of the retaining wall on the southern side of the church and to build a drain channel along the southern, eastern and western walls.

These works are to be considered preparatory for the restoration of the wall paintings (see A.5).

A.5 Restoration works

The aim here is to propose the restoration of the decayed, damaged or incongruous sections of the building, and specifically:

RESTORATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS

Once the drying of the wall has been completed, work can begin on the restoration of the wall paintings. First of all, it will be necessary to repair those sections of the interior walls which show swellings of the plaster due to humidity. From this point of view, the cartouche with the founding inscription above the entrance, which is of great importance in terms of the history of this church, is in a very critical condition. These swellings are often related to the timber elements present in the masonry. It is evident that the repair of the adhesion between plaster and wall must be treated in different ways depending on the conditions of the support. These restoration works require highly qualified personnel, both during the diagnosis and restoration phases.

Another issue that must be addressed is connected to the works on wall paintings carried out during the restoration of 1999. As a result of the removal and subsequent recomposition of some sections of painting damaged by humidity, several cuts are visible, which cause a fragmentation of the painted images and the loss of visual unity.

An assessment is also needed on how to intervene on the paintings on the wall under the portico, which have been severely damaged over the years by vandalism and by exposure to the weather.

Finally, it is necessary to remove the plaster (probably made with a cement-based binder) on the section of the wall behind the wood benches along the lateral naves, substituting it with a breathable and compatible lime-based plaster.

RESTORATION WORKS ON THE PORTICO

The wooden beams of the portico are excessively deformed. Their dimensions are clearly inadequate to support the weight of a covering roof made of stone slabs and the accidental overloads due to snow. The roof beams must therefore be replaced with others of adequate size for the load to be borne.

Since the masonry of the portico is not correctly clamped to that of the church itself, it is necessary to provide for a local dismantling and reconstruction (*scuci-cuci*, i.e. unstitch-stitch) for subsequent portions or the insertion of metal or composite connectors. In the first case, the removed stones must be cleaned, numbered and then re-installed. In the second case, bars that work by friction or jointly with the walls by means of injections of compatible grout should be inserted inside the masonry.

WORKS CONCERNING THE RESTORATION, SUBSTITUTION AND CLEANING OF FURNITURE AND DECORATION

Within the church, there are some furnishings of fine workmanship (iconostasis, pulpit, stacidia, candlesticks, lamps, jalousies, etc.). Some of these elements, especially stacidia along the lateral walls, are in a terrible state of conservation. It is therefore necessary to clean and restore the damaged parts of all furniture and decorations, including the replacement of any missing parts.

The wooden carved iconostasis deserves a separate discussion.

Over time, the iconostasis has been severely damaged; its icons and some wooden fragments are missing as a result of vandalism, neglect and probably theft. The first thing to do, therefore, is to recover the parts of the iconostasis from the pieces of wood found in the narthex^(a), afterwards restoration work can begin on the iconostasis, including the replacement of the missing parts. This work is to be entrusted to wood restoration specialists. As for the icons, if it is not possible to return to Leusë the icons moved to the Museum of Korça, an option that could be considered is to commission iconographers to make copies of them, in accordance with the classical canons of traditional Byzantine painting.

In order to obtain the necessary funding for the restoration of the iconostasis and the possible remaking of the icons, a crowd-funding operation could be undertaken, addressed especially to the villagers who have migrated abroad^(b).

IMPROVING TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

- Align the lighting system with European standards while respecting the architectural and artistic features of the church;
 - Assess the efficiency of the existing video-surveillance system;
 - Install a protection system against atmospheric discharges that is consistent with the features of the building.
-

S4 Enhancement Strategies

A.6 Ensuring accessibility to the church from Përmet

See A.2, chap. I.4.

A.7 Establishing an efficient information and communication system

See A.5, sect. I.5.1.

A.8 Drafting a project for the environmental regeneration of the area surrounding the church

The Action aims at drafting a regeneration project which should provide for the following works:

REPAIR OF THE AREA SURROUNDING THE CHURCH.

Mowing and cutting of invasive vegetation and repairing those parts of the enclosure wall that have been damaged by roots.

In the case of the tombstones, it would be advisable to determine their features together with the inhabitants of the village. The understandable wish to honour the dead according to subjective taste should however take into consideration the sacred nature of the place and the value of the monuments and should therefore tend toward a greater sobriety in terms of size, shape and materials used.

REPAIR OF PATHWAYS.

The stepped path that leads to the church from the road is very slippery, especially when wet and also presents some irregularities that may cause stumbling.

In addition to repairing the damaged sections of the pavement, it could be useful to equip the access to the church with a railing to provide support and protection especially for the elderly and for people with mobility difficulties. This railing should be made in such a way as to reduce visual impact as much as possible. Furthermore, on the terrace that looks out toward the north, in the direction of the Vjosa Valley, paved paths could be built (using the local stone) in order to improve walking around the area in front of the church and to enhance accessibility to the tombs present there.

INSTALLATION OF AN EXTERNAL LIGHTING SYSTEM

We suggest installing a sober exterior illumination system that enhances the church, improving its visibility from a distance and strengthening its role as a territorial landmark also at night. A more efficient exterior illumination would also make the usage and enjoyment of the area on which the church stands safer, considering that it contains a series of differences in level, steps, walls, etc.

A.9 Enhancing the role of the church as a community resource and in terms of tourism

The Action aims at strengthening the role of the church as a tourism-related resource. Access to the church currently depends on the presence and availability of a family from the village, which, occasionally and at their full discretion, opens the doors of the church to those who request it.

As in Kosinë (see A.7, sect. I.5.2), we suggest establishing weekly opening hours associated to a welcoming and surveillance service managed by the inhabitants of the village and with an entrance fee for tourists.

S5 Management Strategies

A.10 Monitoring of the building

See A.6, sect. I.5.1.

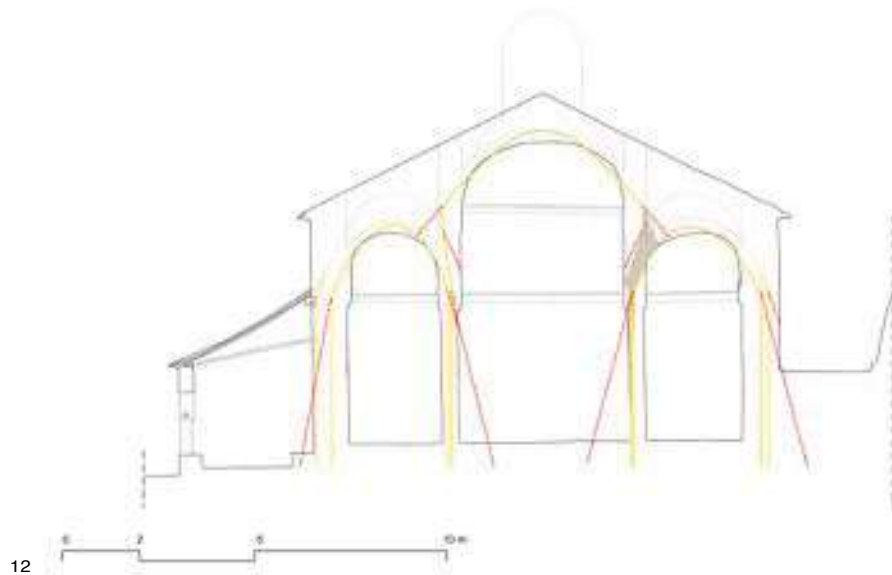
A.11 Drafting of a Maintenance Plan of the church and of the surrounding area

See A.7, sect. I.5.1.

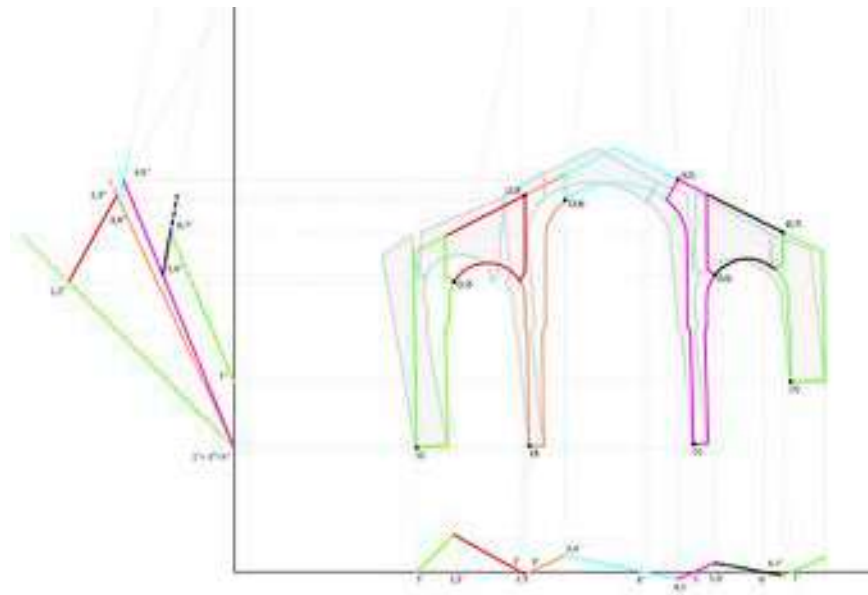
Once established, the plan could be implemented by the villagers themselves, through voluntary work at the service of the community that would cover the simpler and less strenuous tasks.

Notes

- a) There are many abandoned fragments in the narthex, mostly in wood, probably left there after the last restoration work, some of which certainly belong to the iconostasis. These objects should be accurately analysed and catalogued; those that are not significant or too decayed, and therefore not apt for restoration, should be removed and properly disposed of.
- b) If it is true that it was also thanks to money sent by emigrants that the church of Leusë was built (see General description), this would retrace, albeit in a modern key, a story that is two centuries old.



12



13

Figure I-5.3.12 – A thrust line for the transverse arcade. The thick lines in yellow highlight the condition of perfect functioning of the wood tying systems; through the dashed lines in red the condition of tying system failure is shown; the grey shaded area highlights the possible positions of the thrust lines corresponding to a partial functioning of the tying system. [Drawing by Giulia Misseri from Misseri *et al.*, 2020]

Figure I-5.3.13 – Limit analysis with kinematic approach. Local collapse mechanism of the transverse arcade induced by an earthquake action imagined as a set of forces in the horizontal direction, placed at the macro-elements centres of gravity and proportional to vertical loads by means of a common coefficient. Coloured lines highlight boundaries of each macro element, black dots mark the position of cylindrical hinges and inner parts of crack mouth; background grey shapes are evocative of the movement the transverse arcade is undergoing (enhancement of movements are owed to the sake of visibility). [Drawing by Giulia Misseri from Misseri *et al.*, 2020]

PART II
THE MOUNTAIN VILLAGE OF RAZĚM



Figure II-0.1 – Razëm on the map of Albania.

General overview

VILLAGES	ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES	MUNICIPALITY	REGION
Vrith-Razëm	Shkrel	Koplik	Malësi e Madhe	Shkodër

Razëm is a hamlet of the mountain village of Vrith, which is only 4 km away (Fig. II-0.1). After the administrative reform in 2015, Vrith became part of Malësi e Madhe, the northernmost of the Albanian municipalities and as such, a border place. This peculiar geographic location – mountainous isolation on the one hand, and the constant threat from neighbouring nations on the other – also resulted in the creation and development of specific social and cultural phenomena. Two examples worth mentioning are the traditional rhapsodic chants based on the *Eposi i Kreshnikëve*¹ (a cultural heritage of inestimable value) and the celebrated collection of customary laws gathered in the *Kanun* code².

Razëm lies within the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel (established as a protected area in 2014) and is considered the ‘gateway’ to the Western Albanian Alps. Together with the villages of Reç e Bogë, Razëm forms a triad of great interest from the point of view of tourism (Figs. II-0.2 and II-0.3).

The Alpine area on which it stands is characterised by a vast network of trails and a series of high-altitude pastures (*bjeshkë*) with numerous mountain hut settlements

¹ The chants of the oral tradition collected in the Epos narrate stories inspired by the wars against the enemies who came from beyond the Serbian border. More on this topic in chap. II.2.

² See chap. II.2.



Figure II-0.2
The enchanting
landscape around
the village of
Razëm.

that appear today as true testimonies of the collective memory both in anthropological (linked to the shepherd culture and to transhumance) and technological terms.

The evocative landscape, the quality of the air and the proximity to the city of Shkodër soon transformed Razëm into a proper tourist resort, as confirmed by the complex of villas built by the rich bourgeoisie from Shkodër during the Twenties.

As in other Albanian villages, the civil institutions in Razëm are represented by the head of the village (*kryeplaku*), elected every four years among the candidates presented by the community. In Razëm the *kryeplaku* is a key figure for the inhabitants who look to him not only as an intermediate figure between the public administration and the village, but also as a ‘messenger of wisdom’ who is consulted for more personal questions or specific issues linked to the life of the community.

Catholicism is the major religion in the area, and was probably well-established during the first centuries A.D., as emphasised by the presence in the area of the cult of Christian martyrs³. Religious faith has always been and still is a peculiar feature in the sense of belonging to place and community, despite the harsh repression during the period of State atheism (1967-1991) imposed by Hoxha’s regime (see Tönnies, 1975; 1982).

According to data provided by the civil registry of the village of Dedaj for the year 2018, 763 inhabitants are registered in the village of Vrith (297 of whom have emigrated abroad and 60 to other municipalities in the Region of Shkodër). Of the current 406 inhabitants, only 70 live in Razëm. Most of the population belongs to the age segment between 15 and 60 years and the average age is only 38.11.

³ *Ibidem*.

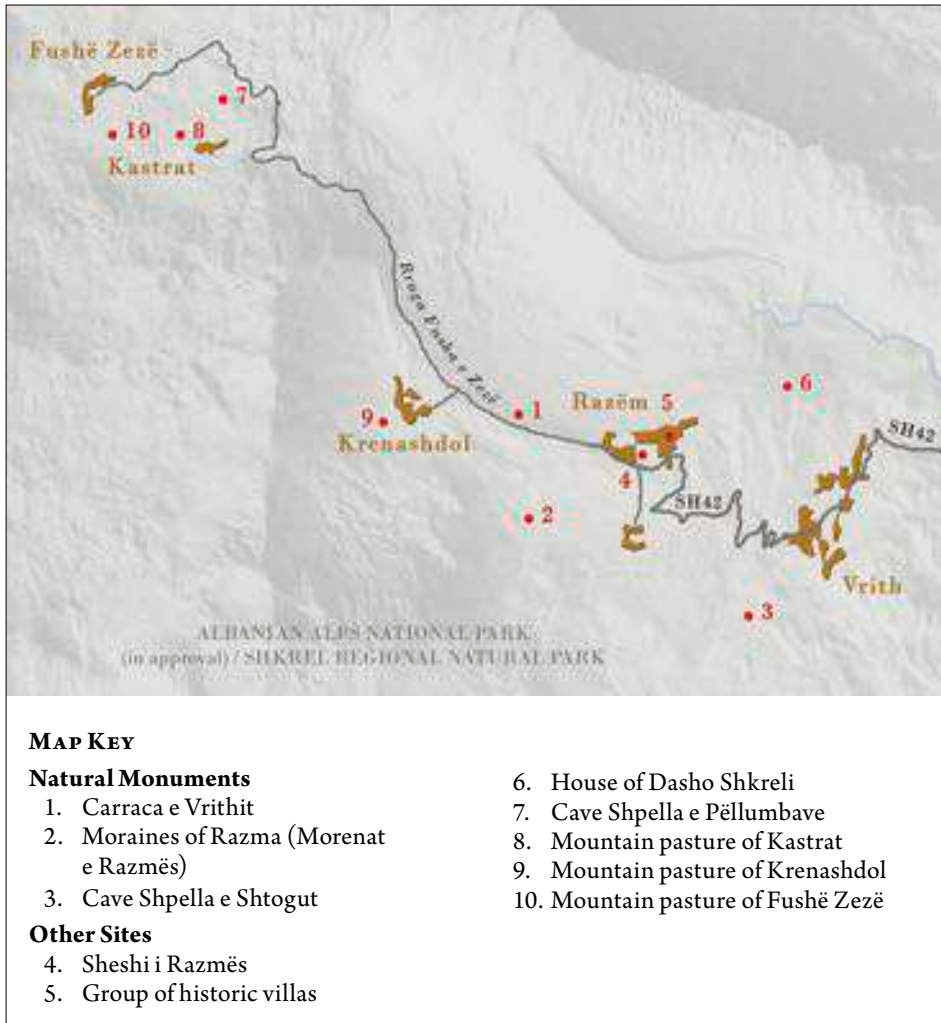


Figure II-0.3
Natural
Monuments and
other significant
sites around
Razëm. [Drawing
by Dritan Kapo]

This is important since one of the most problematic aspects of Albanian rural areas is precisely the elderly average age of the inhabitants.

For Vrith-Razëm – as for other rural areas in Albania – emigration is an issue quite difficult to manage. Currently, the village offers few job opportunities, which, moreover, are mostly limited to the summer, and the interviews carried out during the on-field analysis confirm the wish of the younger population to emigrate. Many of the people interviewed, however, consider emigration as a temporary experience, as an opportunity for economic and professional growth that ensures enhanced conditions for returning to their hometown with the purpose of starting an economic activity. There emerges, therefore, a strong link of the inhabitants to their village, and a remarkable sense of identity and belonging. This, together with the young average age of its inhabitants, is a source of hope for the future of the village.

Food heritage

The food heritage of the area of Malësi e Madhe is the result of the interaction between the severe climate conditions and the natural resources available (pastures and forests). The environmental features have favoured sylvo-pastoral activities and have enabled the development of a culinary tradition – based on meat, milk and seasonal dairy products – that is not very varied, yet is rich in flavours.

The agricultural activity is marginal to the alpine economy. In the limited agricultural surface available, the main crops are corn, beans and potatoes; as for cultivated fruits, the main varieties are cornel berries, plums, quinces, walnuts, hazelnuts and chestnuts. The latter represent one of the leading products of the area.

Typical products and culinary tradition

Home production of bread is still widespread in Malësi e Madhe, in particular the one made of corn (*bukë kollomoqi*, in the local dialect), which was originally prepared and stretched on a flat stone (*votër*) and then cooked over a high flame. The phasing out of this traditional cooking technique has altered the typical flavour of the bread¹.

Local features have favoured the transformation of products based on goat, lamb and pork meat, the reuse of leftovers and the perfecting of food preservation techniques.

Unlike other mostly Muslim regions in Albania, in the alpine areas where Christians are the majority of the population, the home breeding of pigs is widespread and the culinary culture related to pig meat has developed without hindrance. The use of dried (*mish i thatë*) and fried (*mish i skuqur*) pork is also very common.

¹ See <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/pane-di-mais-di-kelmend/>>.



Figure II-1.1
Dried pork (*mish i thatë*) served with typical local cheeses. [Courtesy: VIS, Albania]

The drying of pork traditionally begins on December 6, on the day of the feast of Saint Nicholas² (Fig. II-1.1). The tradition of *mish i thatë* belongs especially to the area of Kelmend, where a prized variety of swine, which unfortunately is currently an endangered species, is bred. The drying involves the use of all the parts of the pig and includes a 5-6 day smoking process through the combustion of fruit or juniper trees.

The *mish i skuqur*, instead, is prepared with the lard and the fatter parts of the pig. It is commonly used for preparing *kaçimak* (a type of cornmeal mush) or eaten together with vegetables (Fig. II-1.2).

Among the traditional meat-based recipes it is worth mentioning the lamb stewed in sheep's milk (*mish qengji i zier në qumësht*) – which is eaten by the shepherds during the months of the transhumance so as to take advantage of the excess meat and milk³ – the skewered lamb and goat (*mish fërliku*), and the stewed meat (*mish i zier në kusi*) accompanied with roast potatoes, cheese, pickled vegetables or seasonal salads (this dish is common throughout the whole of Albania).

In the alpine land, forestry-pastoral practices have historically played a central role also in the production of dairy products (Fig. II-1.3). In addition to goat and sheep *feta* or to *kaçkavall*, which are widespread throughout Albania, other typical cheeses characterised by their ancient origin and traditional preparation methods are: the *jardun*, the *maza e çaprës* and the *mishavina*.

² See <<https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/carne-fritta-conservata-in-botte/>>.

³ “Since this typical dish of our pastoral tradition is in danger of disappearing – affirms the cook Nikolin Pacaj –, I have decided to include it in the menu of my restaurant. To recover the authentic cuisine of our ancestors is the best way to offer our guests a different and unique experience.” (Interview in Razëm on 16 June 2019).



Figure II-1.2
The *kaçimak* (a type
of cornmeal mush).
[Courtesy: Mrizi i
zanave]

Jardun is a creamy cheese similar to yoghurt typical of the Kelmend Mountains. It is prepared with sheep's milk produced between July 20 and August 20, when it is fatter and thus adequately creamy. *Jardun* is consumed entirely at a domestic level since it has a very brief preservation duration, no longer than one day after preparation.

Maza e çaprës has deep roots in the culture of Malësi e Madhe, which go back at least 400 years⁴. It is prepared with cow, goat or sheep's milk, or with a combination of them. The peculiarity of this cheese consists in its production process and in the use of animal hides (sheep or goat) for its maturing⁵. *Maza e çaprës* is esteemed delicacy; even today in the alpine villages of the region (Razëm included) it is served during feasts or for entertaining important guests. The increasing use of plastic containers during the aging process greatly alter its properties and taste.

Mishavinë is a crumbly cheese produced mostly in the alpine pastures of upper Kelmend and Razëm. A request has been made for its registration as a Protected Denomination of Origin - PDO (Tregues Gjeografik i Mbrojtur - TGJM). *Mishavinë*, originally from Montenegro, became widespread in the area of Malësi e Madhe over a century ago. It is traditionally prepared from August to November using cow's or sheep's milk (milked from June to September), and sometimes a mixture of them. This cheese is minced by hand, salted and fermented in wooden containers with holes in the bottom (*tinarë*). After this process is completed, it is hermetically sealed with a layer of fresh melted butter in order to allow the draining of excess whey through the container's holes⁶.

⁴ See <<https://www.fondazioneslowfood.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/maza-e-capres/>>.

⁵ After milking is completed, the milk is boiled, then cooled and separated from the cream, which is preserved with a little bit of salt in a wooden barrel. Once the barrel is full, the cream is placed in an ageing container made with the hide of a lamb or goat, which is dried, cleaned and stitched.

⁶ See <<https://www.fondazioneslowfood.com/it/presidi-slow-food/mishavin/>>.

The tradition of transhumance is also linked to the gathering of medicinal and aromatic herbs. Among the medicinal plants it is worth mentioning the scolopendrium (Hart's tongue fern), used in the preparation of tea, and the martagon lily, used for preparing digestive infusions. During the past decade many of these herbs have begun to be cultivated⁷, whereas those growing spontaneously are still gathered by families in the areas around the village of Reç (Fig. II-1.4).

This locality is known especially for the quality and variety of its chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*) (Skreli & Imami, 2019), which have been awarded certification as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). Thanks to the vast chestnut woods, Malësi e Madhe is the third greatest producer of chestnuts in Albania, after Kukës and Dibra (MBZR, 2014).

The presence of chestnuts is associated to that of white truffles, which are exported mainly to France. The wealth of forest resources has also favoured the presence of mushrooms, which are not highly used in the local culinary tradition, and of other wild forest foods, which, instead, are widely gathered and used (ALPIN, 2015).

It is also common in the area to distil liquors for domestic consumption. The most common are wild pomegranate juice (*lëngu i shegës së egër*) and a sour cherry liquor (*lëng vishnje o vishnjak*).

Critical issues and future prospects

The culinary culture of Malësi e Madhe is characterised by a small number of typical products and dishes. They, however, are remarkable in terms of their production, transformation and preservation methods and express an uncommon capacity to harmonise dietary needs with local features.



Figure II-1.3
The variety of local
cheeses. [Courtesy:
VIS, Albania]

⁷ The preparation and packing of cultivated medicinal and aromatic herbs takes place at the Agro-Reçi SH.B.B. incubator. The company supplies the national market and exports to the USA, France, Germany and Italy (VIS, 2019).

Most of the typical products are not yet legally recognised in accordance with the provisions of Articles 32 and 33 of Law no. 9863/2008 “Food”, also due to the small scale of the production (many products are destined exclusively for domestic consumption).

Added to these ‘local’ critical issues, there are other obstacles that concern the whole of Albania: the strict hygiene regulations adopted by the European Union, the weak marketing strategies, as well as the lack of studies and surveys on the local culinary history and tradition.

In the alpine area, the food heritage should be a driving force of economic development, which invests in the skills, sensibilities and competencies related to traditional knowledge. This heritage must be interpreted as a dynamic system that links the local contexts, the productive landscapes and the customs and behaviours of the community, as well as the intangible knowledge linked to the process of preparation and transformation of the local products.

During the past few years, thanks to the commitment of the Ministry of Agriculture, of the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS), and of the Italian NGO VIS (Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo), progress has been made concerning the enhancement of local food products, thus giving an impulse to the economy and generating new job opportunities. This is the case, for example, with the agricultural cooperative Agro-Reçi SH.B.B., located in Reç, one of the major agricultural incubators in Albania.



Figure II-1.4
A collection of medicinal and aromatic herbs gathered in the forests of Malësi e Madhe. [Courtesy: VIS, Albania]

Intervention strategies

S1 Educational and Training Strategies

A.1 Generating awareness among students concerning the local culinary tradition

This Action aims at disseminating knowledge concerning agriculture, breeding and the local culinary tradition, through active educational activities to be carried out during the school year.

The extra-curricular educational programme could be divided into two phases:

- Active and cooperative learning organised in class through seminars;
- Outdoor learning through workshops and direct experimentation activities, at specific times throughout the year. This phase can be carried out in the form of school trips that would include visits to the alpine pastures (so as to observe the production of dairy products by the shepherds) and in the natural parks.

The area of the parks is characterised by vast wooded zones that offer a precious wild food heritage (strawberries, blueberries, walnuts, mushrooms, chestnuts, etc.). In this case, foraging experiences could be organised during school trips, consisting in the conscious gathering of wild foods that also permits establishing a stronger relationship with the natural environment.

Both people who have professional knowledge of the natural context of Vrith-Razëm and the village elders could participate in the educational projects.

This Action could be promoted as a pilot project at the school of Vrith and subsequently replicated in other schools of Malësi e Madhe.

A.2 Organising training courses on the wild resources of the land

The wooded areas of Malësi e Madhe have a wealth of wild resources, such as spontaneous fruits and aromatic and medicinal herbs. Some of these resources (such as mushrooms and truffles) do not belong to the Albanian Alpine culinary tradition.

The Action proposes the organisation of theoretical-practical courses concerning phytoalimurgy. These courses should provide the basic elements of environmental and ethnobotanical education and should aim at the identification, gathering, preparation, preservation and packaging of wild foods (strawberries, mushrooms, truffles, scolopendrium, martagon lily, etc.) from the forests of Malësi e Madhe^(a).

The Regional Natural Park of Shkrel could promote this Action.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.3 Creating a Digital Inventory of the Typical Recipes and Memories of the Local Culinary Culture

See A.3, chap. I.1.

This Action could be promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and by the Regional Government of Shkodër and implemented on the ground by the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe with the participation of NGOs active in the area, food science experts, anthropologists and ethnologists.^(b)

A.4 Creating an Atlas of typical local products

See A.4, chap. I.1.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Recognizing the typical products in accordance with Law no. 9863/2008

See A.5, chap. I.1.

The typical cheeses of the area of Malësi e Madhe (jardun, mishavinë, maza e çaprës, etc.) could reasonably aspire to a certification as “Tregues Gjeografik i Mbrojtur” (art. 32) and “Produkt ushqimor tradicional” (art. 33); their possible recognition would ensure their safeguarding and a greater food safety.

A.6 Promoting experiential tourism for enhancing the local culinary heritage

See A.7, chap. I.1.

In the area in question, this Action could be undertaken:

- At the mountain huts of Kastrat, Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë, and would concern both the everyday life of the shepherds and the processes of cheese production (see A.9, chap. II.3);

- In the forests of Razëm and of the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel through the foraging practice (see A.1), and concerning the gathering, preparation and consumption of wild foods from the woods. This experience could be promoted and implemented by the accommodation and restaurant owners of Razëm in order to increase the conventional tourist amenities and introduce visitors to ethnobotany, the biodiversity of the alpine region and to the discovery of new flavours ^(c).

A.7 Organising events linked to the enhancement of the alpine culinary heritage in Razëm

This Action aims at organising initiatives linked to the promotion of typical products and of the local culinary tradition.

In addition to the *Feast of the alpine pastures* (see A.9, chap. I.2) and the other Actions related to the alpine pastures (see A.6, chap. II.1 and A.10, chap. II.4), the following initiatives could be planned in the square of Razëm during the period of a greater influx of tourists:

- A *Farmers' Market*, in order to provide farmers, shepherds and the inhabitants of the villages of Malësi e Madhe an opportunity for offering tourists the typical local products. The Market could take place once or twice a week;
- A *Culinary feast of the alpine territory*, during which the cooks in the area, together with the village elders and the shepherds, could serve dishes belonging to the culinary tradition of the area of Malësi e Madhe;
- The *Alps Wild Food*, an event for fostering the knowledge and use of the wild foods from the alpine areas. During this initiative, local cooks could offer tourists dishes based on local spontaneous fruits and aromatic herbs.

A.8 Enhancing wild forest foods

This Action aims at taking advantage of the wealth of wild foods available in the forests of Malësi e Madhe so as to generate new occupational and productive prospects.

In order to achieve this, the creation of an incubator destined for products in the mountainous areas and, in particular, for wild foods available in forests, is proposed. The existing incubator in Reç could be expanded or, alternatively, serve as a reference point for the construction of the new one.

Notes

- a) See "Wood*ing – wild food lab Academy" (<<https://wood-ing.org/academy/>>).
- b) For a model of Inventory, see "Progetto E.CH.I. Etnografie italo-svizzere per la valorizzazione del patrimonio immateriale P.O. di Cooperazione Transfrontaliera Italia Svizzera 2007-2013" (<<http://www.echi-interreg.eu/pages/il-progetto-e.ch.i>>).
- c) See <<https://www.wildfoodsitaly.com/>>.

Traditions, social practices and local craftsmanship

Traditions and cultural heritage

Razëm belongs culturally to the vast area of Malësi e Madhe (literally, “the great mountains”).

When the theme of the mountains of Northern Albania is discussed, the association spontaneously arises with the *Kanun*, the celebrated customary law code that was set in writing from the 15th century onward. More particularly, the area of Malësi e Madhe has been under the influence of the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* (Gjeçovi, 1933)¹, which for centuries regulated the lives of the inhabitants of the mountains and wavered only under pressure from Hoxha’s regime (Bardhoshi, 2012^a)². The founding element of the *Kanun* is the *fis* (literally “the lineage”), the enlarged family system that regulates both personal and social balances.

Some of the ‘positive’ aspects of the *Kanun* are still widely felt, such as the sacredness of the given word (*besa*) and the sense of honour and hospitality, particularly significant elements that still nowadays rank as founding structures of Albanian identity (Dingo, 2007; Schmitt, 2020). *Besa* indicates not only “the pact and alliance” with others in keeping the given word, but also honesty towards oneself, the respect for an interior “sacred code” which forms the basis of a process of self-regulation (Dingo, 2007).

¹ The first written collection of the *Kanun* is by Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874-1929), an Albanian Catholic priest from Kosovo.

² Bardhoshi (2012^a) considers the social structure illustrated in the *Kanun* as a “semi or autonomous social field”, capable of self-preserving even when facing the pressure from the official legislative regulations of the State. This would have enabled the ‘latent’ survival of some social practices and provisions even during the regime, and therefore their partial rehabilitation after the collapse of the dictatorship.

In Malësi e Madhe (as also in the rest of Albania), hospitality plays a fundamental role: “the home of Albanians belongs to God and to the guest” (*shtëpia e shqiptarit është e Zotit dhe e mikut*), says the *Kanun*, and the guest, as a symbol of otherness, receives full attention and respect from the owner of the house. Even the greatest enemy loses his ‘negative’ connotation the moment he steps into the house (Dingo, 2007; Schmitt, 2020).

Among the unsolved issues inherited from the *Kanun* remain the patriarchal structure of the family and the subordinate position of women in society. Women’s only recognised activities are taking care of their husbands, bringing up their children and looking after the house, and are thus excluded from any possibility of social emancipation. Fortunately, the most controversial and debated aspect of the *Kanun* – blood vengeance (*gjakmarrja*) – seems instead to have long been eradicated from the territory of Malësi e Madhe.

Another feature that characterises the local culture worth mentioning is the rhapsodic tradition. The chants collected in the *Eposi i Kreshnikëve*³ (an anthology of the heroic exploits of the brothers Muji and Halili) have been orally transmitted thanks to the wandering rhapsodists who, accompanied by their *lahuta*⁴, kept alive the historical memory of the centuries-old resistance against the menace of Serbian expansionism.

While in neighbouring Kosovo rhapsodists are still singing with their *lahuta*, disseminating the epic word (their numbers seem to have in fact increased in the era of social media), in Albania the rhapsodic tradition has almost completely disappeared.

Traditional Festivities

Religion has always been an element of social cohesion in the area of Malësi e Madhe. In this land, the Catholic faith constitutes a strong identity factor and the inhabitants have maintained it throughout the centuries, also overcoming adversities and persecution due to the State atheism imposed by the Communist regime since 1967 (Fig. II-2.1).

In Razëm the inhabitants meet regularly at the church of Bzhetë (a small village in the Municipality of Shkrel), a place for religious but also social practices: the church periodically organises activities for children and teenagers. Furthermore, it is here that on May 9th the ceremony linked to the feast of St. Nicholas, the patron of Vrith, takes place. The feast is known as *Shën Nikolla i Pranverës* (Saint Nicholas of Spring), since it coincided historically with the departure of the shepherds toward the alpine pastures⁵.

The religious feast of Shën Prenja⁶ (July 26) takes place instead in the area surrounding the central square of Razëm where nine wells are located (see chap. II.4).

³ The *Eposi i Kreshnikëve* is officially listed as part of the Albanian Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was established only in 2010. To date (July 2020), in addition to the *Eposi i Kreshnikëve*, there are only six other items listed as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage safeguarded by the State: the iso-polyphonic music, the dialects *gheg* and *tosk*, the homophonic music from central Albania, the folk music from Shkodër (*ahengu shkodran*), the art of making musical instruments and the traditional dances of the women of Dropulli (a town in the South inhabited by a Greek minority).

⁴ One-stringed musical instrument that is widespread in the Balkans. From this instrument derives as well the title of *Lahuta e Malcis*, a famous epic poem by Gjergj Fishta, a Franciscan friar from Fishtë (a village near Scutari) and an illustrious representative of the Albanian Renaissance.

⁵ See <https://issuu.com/go2albania/docs/go2_albania_veriu_eshte_feste>.

⁶ Shën Prenja (dialectal version of Shën Premtja) – a 2nd century martyr who according to tradition was born on a Friday (*premtja* meaning Friday) – is venerated throughout Northern Albania, where the cult of early Christian martyrs is widespread. She is known as Saint Venera by the Western Church and as Agia Paraskevi by the Eastern Church.



Figure II-2.1
A period
photograph
shows the women
of Kelmend
(a village near
Razëm) wearing
a *xhubleta* during
a ceremony. [©
Muzeu Kombëtar
i Fotografisë
“Marubi”]

In the past, during the ceremony the young girls of the village celebrated water, in both its symbolic and substantive sense, and its important role in the life of the community⁷. The meaning of this rite can be understood considering the scarcity of surface water resources in the area of Razëm-Vrith (see chap. II.4). Unfortunately, there is no certain information regarding the reason for the construction of nine wells in such a small area, yet this confers an aura of mystery to the place.

Local craftsmanship

In Malësi e Madhe, as in the rest of the country, the artisan tradition suffered as a result of emigration (which interrupted the flow in the transmission of knowledge), and of the policies of the Communist regime which were oriented towards the collectivisation of production and the application of Soviet-style industrial models (Mëhilli, 2017). The effectiveness of these policies is confirmed by the surveys undertaken by the ethnologist Abaz Dojaka on peasant houses in the area of Dukagjin. He shows how in a period of only 6 years (between 1954 and 1960), there was a considerable decrease in the amount of homemade everyday items, together with a parallel increase in those produced by State-run cooperatives (Dojaka, 2017). Other local factors linked to the specific features of the mountain territories, such as poverty and social and economic isolation, may have contributed to the weakening of certain artisan practices.

Due to the elements described above, much of the knowledge and traditional techniques were lost, together with the people who held this know-how⁸. The scarce economic competitiveness of artisan products as compared to those which are industrially

⁷ See <votramagazine.com/razma-guri-shndrites-ne-gjerdanin-e-turizmit-malor/>. From the testimonies obtained during the on-field analysis it does not appear that the feast is currently celebrated.

⁸ From the on-field analysis undertaken in the area of Vrith/Razëm, no objects of particular interest were identified as part of the current artisan production.



Figure II-2.2
Traditional hand-
made garments.
[Courtesy: VIS,
Albania]

rently in danger of disappearing forever. The last representatives of this ancient craft are in fact very elderly women and it is difficult for them to find apprentices willing to learn and carry on the practice. Unfortunately, there is no type of State protection for the *xhubleta* and it is not included in the list of Albanian Intangible Cultural Assets.

Artifacts and work tools

Before the Communist regime, in the region of the North-Western Albanian Alps (where the village of Vrith-Razëm is located) everyday objects were made entirely of pine wood and produced in the context of the family or the *fis*¹¹ with the use of common tools such as the axe, chisel, knife, etc. (Dojaka, 2017). According to Shkurti (1985), even hoes were made completely of wood.

manufactured (often imported), drove most artisans to seek more profitable jobs or to emigrate. Some practices, however, have survived and are a vivid testimony of the collective memory, still capable of transmitting the values of tradition (Fig. II-2.2).

Traditional dress

Among the artisan practices inherited from the past, a central role is played by the production of the *xhubleta* – the female dress, which is widespread in the mountains of Northern Albania (Fig. II-2.3).

This garment, which seems to have very ancient roots (Bido, 1991), is made with yarn of the highest quality and, in the variety used in Malësi e Madhe, is ornamented with gold and silver jewels such as pins and chains, generally placed on the most exposed parts of the dress (sash, belt, pinafore). To the value of the raw materials must be added the value of the time necessary for its production, which can be estimated to be around 6 to 8, and sometimes even 12 months⁹.

The production of the *xhubleta* according to the strict traditional procedures came to an end towards the Sixties¹⁰ (Ulqini, 1997) and is cur-

⁹ According to a testimony obtained during the on-field investigation (the interview took place in Vrith on 16.06.2019). For a documentary entirely devoted to the *xhubleta* see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0cdpBZBQuw&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR117-b5WvrnhgTCTbVWtiUYKmskXuNkOtIEb5BNdslRzsvFXhsdy6oJNkK>>.

¹⁰ The cause for this can be related to the programme of female emancipation determined by the regime, which contemplated the modernisation of the country and the collectivisation of labour and production; a second cause is related to the strategy for a Communist-style homogenisation that was reflected also in the way of dressing.

¹¹ It is necessary to specify that in the mountain communities of the North there was no 'nuclear family' as such. As many as 20 to 30 people belonging to different nuclei within the same *fis* could live under the same roof. Production activities were therefore also extended to the enlarged family.



Domestic furniture such as tables (*sofra*), kneading trough (*magje*), chairs (*shkamb*) or cradles (*djep*), objects linked to food production, such as the butter churn (*dybek*), or those for knitting, such as knitting needles (*furka*) were characterised for the almost absolute absence of metal elements (Figs. II-2.4-II-2.6).

Even the cutlery, glasses and small containers used in the kitchen were mostly in wood (Papeleka, 1985). The furniture of wealthier families were decorated with religious or natural motifs (such as plants and animals), and occasionally with astral and pagan motifs (Muka, 2007). The bedrooms were equipped with hides of sheep or goats (*postiqe*) which were used both for sitting and for sleeping (Muka *et al.*, 2004).

Metal utensils and tools were rare and were obtained often through barter or bought at the market of Shkodër or else from pedlars (Dojaka, 2017).

During the on-field analysis it was possible to visit the workshop of the last smith of Vrith, who still today, despite his old age, produces and repairs tools for agriculture and woodcutting, and when necessary is also a carpenter. He is the last bearer of a knowledge and of an ‘art of living’ that risks being lost forever under the pressure of industrial production (Fig. II-2.7).

Traditional building

No examples were found in Razëm of dwellings built earlier than the 20th century. Traditional building techniques survived mostly in the mountain huts of the alpine pastures and in some houses in Vrith that, however, do not present signs of artisan workmanship of particular value.

Figure II-2.3
Studio portrait
photographs of
families from
Shkodër wearing
traditional
garments. [©
Muzeu Kombëtar
i Fotografisë
“Marubi”]



4



5



6

Figure II-2.4
A traditional
wooden butter
churn (*dybek*).

[Courtesy: Franc
Vukaj]

Figure II-2.5
An old kneading
trough (*magje*).

[Courtesy: VIS,
Albania]

Figure II-2.6
A traditional
wooden table
(*sofra*): the family
gathered around
it to eat, sitting on
cushions placed
on the floor.

[Courtesy: Franc
Vukaj]

Until the second half of the 19th century, the population of the Western Albanian plateau lived in rudimentary and provisional-looking dwellings. The interior had no windows and usually consisted of a single room shared by the family and their animals (Dojaka, 2017). The buildings typically had dry stone walls or a timber frame, with the roof covering in straw or wooden shingles (Fig. II-2.8).

Only during the first decades of the 20th century did the use of stone masonry with lime mortar and alpine type roofs become widespread (Muka *et al.*, 2004) (Fig. II-2.9).

According to Muka (2007), the construction of peasant houses took place in two phases. The first phase – which consisted in the construction of the masonry and roof – was generally supervised by a professional (a master builder, often itinerant and seasonal), who directed the work carried out by the owners, who also had the task of finding the building materials. The second phase, which was usually carried out autonomously by the owners, consisted in the finishing work, as well as the construction of the interior furniture, the agricultural annexes, the beehives and the enclosure (cf. Dojaka, 2017).

Critical issues and future prospects

In order to initiate a lasting and conscious process of development it is necessary for the inhabitants of Malësi e Madhe, who are traditionally closed to external influences and stimuli, to begin a sincere dialogue with their past, recognising in it both its potentials and criticalities.



The issue of female emancipation must play a fundamental role in the development of these communities. The recovery of some artisan practices (for example the *xhubleta*) and their innovative development, could open new perspectives in terms of job opportunities for women, helping them to extend beyond the domestic dimension in which they are currently relegated.

This fundamental 'pact' with the past is also essential in terms of the development of a tourism which, drawing on criteria of social and environmental sustainability, may be capable of enhancing the 'positive' aspects of the identity of the places (see Bonesio, 2017). In this respect, the actions aimed at the reconstruction of memory through the recovery of the local crafts, the rhapsodic traditions and the rediscovery of traditional feasts are essential. Artisan products, in particular furniture and decorations, if supported by appropriate development projects and policies, could open a new market (for example the furnishing of the increasing numbers of new accommodation facilities and resorts), thus contributing to the economic development of the territory.

Research can play an important role in the processes of enhancement of the roots from the past, but also towards the generation of new perspectives among the inhabitants concerning the world that surrounds them. The territorial study must happen in direct contact with the places and their inhabitants, who in this way become main actors and not simple passive subjects observed from afar. Research can also offer a contribution in terms of the knowledge and preservation of the alpine building tradition, through the production of specific tools of cultural dissemination (Fig. II-2.10).

Figure II-2.7
A view of the workshop of the last smith of Vrith.



Figure II-2.8
Detail of a
mountain hut
roof, covered with
wooden shingles.



Figure II-2.9
Detail of a window
with stone
monolithic jambs
and lintel.



Figure II-2.10
Two expressions
of the local alpine
tradition. *Above:*
A dry stone wall
topped with broken
branches. *Below:*
Intertwined sticks
that enclose a
korita.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Promoting educational projects related to the *xhubleta*

In order to make a *xhubleta* it is not only necessary to have great technical skills, but also plenty of time and remarkable economic resources. Today, the women who have inherited the ancient knowledge for producing this traditional dress are increasingly few and elderly, whereas the customer base for these products is very limited (museums or particularly wealthy collectors).

The Action proposes to initiate two coordinated educational processes for the safeguarding of this cultural asset. The first aims at recovering and formalising the technical knowledge required for producing the *xhubleta*; the second concerns new interpretative keys which, beginning from the traditional matrix, may result in more versatile and competitive products^(a). In this respect, the involvement of young designers interested in the artisan tradition, through art residencies or regional festivals could be envisaged. The Action could be implemented concurrently with Action A.3.

A.2 Promoting educational projects aimed at the creation of new skills and job opportunities in the craftsmanship sector

See A.1, chap. I.2.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.3 Drafting of a Technical Handbook on Traditional Local Building

See Action A.3, chap. I.2.

In the context of the Albanian Alps, a useful reference can be the handbook devoted to the building tradition of Theth (Shkreli, 2018), a village in the Municipality of Shkodër which is also a well-known alpine tourist destination^(b).

A.4 Initiating ethnographic research projects in the alpine area

Ethnographic research in Albania has undergone a new development phase after the collapse of Hoxha's regime, thanks especially to the remarkable work carried out by the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Study (Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit - IAKSA).

The Action – to be entrusted to the scholars (anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers) who collaborate with the Institute and/or teach at Albanian or foreign universities – should involve a critical assessment of the phenomena linked to local traditions and crafts, and avoid the patriotic/lauding style that characterised Albanian ethnographic and anthropological literature during the Communist regime. In the case of some topics, such as the *Kanun*, this process is already ongoing (see, *inter alia*, Voell, 2003, 2011, 2012, 2016; Bardhoshi, 2012^a, 2012^b, 2013, 2016,) and it would be desirable to extend it to other issues which characterise alpine culture.

Field research should be encouraged as the principal method of analysis in the process of gathering knowledge about the area. The direct contact with the inhabitants, the places of memory, and the artefacts and art of the artisan tradition, is pivotal, in particular for documenting the awkward passage from the Communist regime to the democratic State.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.5 Fostering the creation of a new craft business

See Action A.5, chap. I.2.

In the specific context of Vrith-Razëm, local artisans could be involved in the building-environmental recovery works proposed in chap. II.4 and in chap. II.5.

A.6 Promoting the rhapsodic tradition of Northern Albania

The aim of this Action is to organise events, concerts or festivals related to the epic singing tradition with the Kosovan rhapsodists and with those still present in the Albanian Alps.

This would generate moments of interaction and sharing between the inhabitants, the tourists and the scholars (ethnographers, musicologists, musicians, etc.) who dedicate their research activities to themes related to the oral tradition.

These initiatives – to be included in tourism promotion strategies – could be associated to local events, both existing (such as the Literary Festival of Razëm; see A.3, chap. II.5) or proposed in these Guidelines such as the Feast of Shën Prenja and the Feast of the Alpine Pastures (see A.8).

A.7 Proposing the inclusion of the *xhubleta* in the Intangible Heritage of Albania

This Action proposes to support the inclusion of the ancient art of making the *xhubleta* in the official list of intangible assets safeguarded by the State. The visibility that this recognition generates could contribute to its protection (see A.1). The *xhubleta* fully complies with the requirements established in article 55 of Law no. 27 of 17.05.2018, dedicated to the “Types of intangible cultural assets”, as an eligible asset. This would be a first step toward an eventual candidature of the *xhubleta* as an Intangible Asset protected by UNESCO^(c).

A.8 Promoting the area through feasts and events

With the purpose of promoting tourism, it could be useful to prepare a detailed calendar of the feasts specifically dedicated to Razëm-Vrith, hinged on religious feasts and other events significant to the historical memory of the village.

One of the aims of the Actions is surely the inclusion of the most significant of these feasts in the “Feasts of the North” (*Veriu është festë*) and subsequently in the *National Calendar of Local Feasts*^(d).

FEAST OF SHËN PRENJA, IN THE SQUARE OF RAZËM

The feast of Shën Prenja – which takes place in accordance with the Orthodox calendar on July 26th – has not been celebrated for quite some time and its recovery could be an interesting opportunity for social cohesion, as well as for the enhancement of the village in terms of tourism. Concerts of rhapsodic chants and folk dances could be organised for the occasion in the village square (see A.7).

FEAST OF THE ALPINE PASTURES

The event would offer tourists a unique opportunity for getting to know the alpine pastures and the production process of the dairy products made in the mountain huts. These huts could provide temporary accommodation in order to allow visitors a richer experience in contact with the shepherds, and also give them the opportunity to buy alpine cheeses (see A.11, chap. II.3).

LITERARY FESTIVAL OF RAZËM

The event is organised every year at the end of May and involves participants from all over Albania (see A.3 and note b), chap. II.5).

It is suggested that initiatives which are linked to the local traditional culture, such as events concerning the *Eposi i Kreshnikëve* and the rhapsodic culture (see A.7) be carried out during the festival.

Notes

- a) See the “Guri i Zi” project, named after the village of the same name to the South-East of Shkrodrë. The project, implemented since 2006 by the Italian association Idee Migranti Onlus, involves the women of the village in the production of artisan textile products, which are based on tradition, yet aim at innovative developments in terms of style and type of products. The project has been remarkably successful and includes a showroom and shop in Milan. See <http://www.guriizi.com/progetto_filosofia/chi_siamo/II_Progetto_Guri_I_Zi.aspx>.
- b) See <https://issuu.com/go2albania/docs/trashegimia_ndertimore_ne_theth_-_e>.
- c) Scholars and collectors (in particular Agim Bido and Luljeta Dano) have been promoting the candidature of the *xhubleta* as a UNESCO Intangible Heritage.
- d) For information on the calendar “The Feast of the North” see <https://issuu.com/go2albania/docs/vija_16> and <<http://infokult.al/botohet-kalendari-i-festave-te-veriut-te-shqiperise/>>. The Calendar of Local Feasts for 2019 can be consulted using the following link: <<http://www.mjedisi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Kalendari-2019.pdf>>.

Landscape

The area of Razëm is remarkable in terms of natural and landscape resources, as is confirmed by its location within the National Park of Shkrel (Parku Natyror Rajonal i Shkrelit) and the future National Park of the Albanian Alps (Parku Kombëtar i Alpeve Shqiptare), which will include 43% of the Albanian flora (INCA, 2015).

This chapter begins with the description of the natural habitat that surrounds and qualifies the territory and then focuses on the other landscape typologies.

Landscape features

Razëm is located on a karstic plateau at an altitude of approximately 900 metres above sea level, in an unspoiled natural environment. The area is composed of carbonate, limestone and dolomite formations of the Mesozoic era and Paleocene *flysch facies*. The topography of the area is characterised by an alternation of plateaus and remarkably steep mountain areas belonging to the Albanian Alps.

There is a prevalence of black pine, beech and white fir forests, low scrub and bushes that create a striking contrast with the bare slopes of Veleçik and Veleçiku i Vogël Mountains (Fig. II-3.1). Forest resources are mostly concentrated in the area of Fushë Zezë. It is here and in the areas of Bogë, Theth and Vermosh that the greatest forests of Albania were located. This heritage was impoverished especially during the massive deforestation which has taken place since the Nineties (Diku & Shuka, 2017), and is often the object of arson and of illegal exploitation practices (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, 2017). In spite of this, the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe still possesses one of the largest forest extensions in Albania, including a primeval beech forest, *Livadhi i Harushës*, located in the area of Vermosh (Diku & Shuka, 2017).



Figure II-3.1 – The natural landscape around Razëm.

Two caves contribute to the richness of the natural landscape – *Shpella e Shtogut* and *Shpella e Pëllumbave* – as well as the *Morenat e Razmës*, formations of karst caves and deposits of glaciers of the Quaternary era (Fig. II-3.2). These moraines create a suggestive landscape of hills approximately 50-80 metres high throughout the area of Razëm, Koplík and Dedaj. The *Morenat e Razmës*, together with a 200 year-old specimen of *Celtis australis* in Vrith (*Carraca e Vrithit*), were listed as Natural Monuments by the Decree of the Council of Ministers no. 676 of 20.12.2002.

Another typical feature are the high-altitude pastures (generally over 1,000 metres above sea level) with a habitat dominated by plant associations such as *festucetum paniculatae*, *phleo-poetum alpinae*, *seslerietalia juncifoliae*, *stipo-festucetum* and *festuco-brometea* (Fig. II-3.3).

A dense network of routes (trails, paths, forest roads, mule tracks, dirt roads, etc.) with a rich history marks the mountain landscape. They wind along slopes, traverse forests and alpine pastures, offering those who travel on them unique and impressive views (Fig. II-3.4).

Part of this important heritage recently underwent a redevelopment project also involving signage¹. It is a first important step toward a more complete process of recovery, enhancement and management of the trail network provided for in the

Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan. An efficient trail network could in fact be a useful tool for responding to the growing tourism-trekking demand² and for promoting knowledge of the landscape and historical-cultural heritage of the area in accordance with the postulates of soft mobility³.

¹ The “Sinjalistika Turistike” project was promoted by the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, and financed by the Austrian Development Cooperation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. See <<https://bashkiamalesiemadhe.gov.al/2018/12/15/projekti-sinjalistika-turistike/>>.

² The National Sectoral Plan for Tourism in the Albanian Alps (Plani Kombëtar Sektorial i Turizmit për rajonin e Alpeve Shqiptare - PKSTA), foresees an increase of 29% in tourism between 2016 and 2031 (from 67,000 to 579,000 visitors) (MTM, 2017: 47).

³ For the region of Shkodër, the National Trail Map includes only some trails that extend throughout the territory of the region’s capital and reach as far as the village of Dedaj. The area of Razëm-Vrith and of other nearby villages are still not covered by this map. See <<http://tourism.albinfo.al/>>.

The landscape of the alpine pastures

The landscape of Razëm is characterised by summer mountain grazing, carried out cyclically on the plateaus of Kastrat, Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë. Transhumance has an ancient tradition with solid roots in the culture of Malësi e Madhe (Muka, 2007), and is referred to in the norms of the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* (Gjeçovi, 1933, art. 219). In Northern Albania, until 1955, the *madra*⁴, or community of shepherds, carried out the alpine pasture activities and dairy production. During the Communist regime, state-run dairy companies (*baxho*) gradually replaced them (Kurti, 1986).

The quality of the pastoral landscape of Razëm is the result of the combination of pastures, mountain huts and all the other elements that are useful to the alpine activity.

There are two types of mountain hut settlements. In the alpine pasture of Kastrat (the oldest), mountain huts form a compact block located near the forest of Mount Maja e Zezë. In the alpine pastures of Fushë Zezë and Krenashdol, instead, mountain huts are separated from each other, thus generating a spread out settlement pattern (Figs. II-3.5-II-3.7).

The alpine settlement model includes other components which, together with the natural features of the place (bare rock slopes, bushes, forests, etc.), contribute to making the landscape even more evocative and bucolic. Consider for example the trails and tracks, the enclosures, often made in dry-stone or with intertwined sticks or wooden boards, the wells with drinking troughs (*korita*) and the *gjollë me rrasë guri*, spaces paved with stone slabs for giving salt to the animals (Muka, 2007) (Figs. II-3.8 and II-3.9).

These alpine pastures have suffered for some time from a crisis that has weakened their economic and social role. The depopulation of the villages and other socio-economic



Fig. II-3.2. Above: The *Morenat e Razmës*. Below: The cave *Shpella e Shtogut*.



Figure II-3.3 – High-altitude pastures: a habitat where different vegetal species co-exist.

⁴ The *madra* had the task of collectively managing the herds of several villages and the dairy production during the period of transhumance and summer grazing (Kurti, 1986).



Figure II-3.4
A mule track
flanked by typical
stone walls.

causes have greatly reduced the number of shepherds working in the mountains, thus bringing about a process of abandonment and decay of the alpine landscape. The factor that most contributes to their isolation is the lack of vehicular access. There is no road connecting the alpine pasture of Kastrat to Vrith-Razëm.

There is also no specific policy regarding alpine pastures in Albania. The situation is worsened by the absence of regulations for safeguarding the authenticity of the existing settlements. In numerous mountain huts, works that have altered their original appearance acting as visual detractors of the landscape, can be observed. Mountain huts have never been the subject of a census and no scientific or educational publications that document their building features are known.

The agricultural landscape

Due to the climate and to the rough alpine morphology, Razëm has a limited availability of agricultural lands. The agricultural economy is linked to self-sustenance and the direct commerce of products in the surrounding villages. In addition to the vegetable gardens attached to the dwellings, the cultivated areas are mostly in Krenashdol, Shtogaj and in Fusha e Lugsit, due to the better characteristics of the soil and exposure to the sun (Fig. II-3.9).

The crops, mostly corn, beans and potatoes, are cultivated on the embankments of more sloping areas or in a series of minute arable spaces.

The local economy is linked more to sylvo-pastoral activities (Diku & Shuka, 2017) which, like agriculture, suffer from a lack of policies aimed at supporting small local producers and incentivising quality traditional production.



Figure II-3.5
An isolated mountain hut with the enclosure made of intertwined tree branches in the alpine pasture of Krenashdol.



Figure II-3.6
The alpine pastures of Kastrat.



Figure II-3.7
The alpine pasture of Fushë Zezë.



Figure II-3.8
Landscape
components of
the alpine pasture
of Fushë Zezë.
Above: A drinking
trough (*korita*).
Below: Animal
stables built with
intertwined tree
branches.

Critical issues and future prospects

The landscape of Razëm and of its surroundings has been characterised throughout the centuries by the dynamic interaction between the local community and the mountain. Its beauty lies in its anthropological, physical, perceptive, aesthetic and ecological features, which together constitute the symbolic image of the alpine space and are fundamental resources for the development of tourism (Fig. II-3.10).

In the light of the analysis carried out, large-scale landscape planning that manages the territorial transformations, protects its cultural and environmental values, and enhances local resources, is currently lacking.

In the absence of a Landscape Plan, the only custodian of the landscape heritage is the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel (established in 2014). Its impact, however, is still limited since it lacks a Management Plan. The regulatory framework will soon be completed with the establishment of the National Park of the Albanian Alps.

Once this process has been perfected, it will be necessary to define new tools and projects for increasing the identity value of the alpine landscape. The safeguarding and enhancing efforts should be focused mainly on the alpine pastures. They are a actual territorial landmark and a productive micro-universe of great historical, socio-economic and environmental importance.



9



10

Figure II-3.9 – The agricultural landscape of Fusha e Lugsit.

Figure II-3.10 – A view of Veleçik Mountain.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Training of new professional figures and creation of competencies at the institutional level aimed at regional landscape planning

See A.1, chap. I.3.

A.2 Promoting educational projects concerning the landscape and the environment

See A.2, chap. I.3.

In the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, these projects can be carried out in the form of an outdoor educational workshop in the area of the Regional Park of Shkrel and, in particular, in the alpine pastures⁽⁶⁾. A deeper knowledge of the environment of the alpine pastures, of the knowledge connected to shepherding activities and of dairy production processes may increase the younger population's awareness of the importance of the natural resources and biodiversity of the Park.

The Action could be proposed experimentally in the school of Vrith, and possibly replicated in the schools of other villages in the Malësi e Madhe area.

S2 Planning Strategies

A.3 Drafting of the Landscape Plan for the Shkodër Region

See A.3, chap. I.3.

S.5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.4 Drafting of the Landscape Atlas of Malësi e Madhe

See A.4, chap. I.3.

The digital version of the Atlas could be included on the website of the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe or on that of the Regional Agency for the Protected Areas in Shkodër, also with the aim of offering the local population, visitors and scholars the possibility of suggesting improvements or changes.

A.5 Drafting of the Community Map of the villages of Malësi e Madhe

See A.5, chap. I.3.

A.6 Recognition of transhumance as the historical essence and intangible heritage of the Shkodër Region

See A.6, chap. I.3.

A.7 Creating a Digital Hiking Trail Inventory

See A.7, chap. I.3.

A.8 Documenting the cultural heritage of the alpine pastures of Razëm

The Action aims at activating interdisciplinary research projects that inquire into the culture of the alpine pastures from a historical and ethnographic perspective. The goal is to offer scientific contributions on a topic that has not been explored enough in Albania with the purpose of determining tools for its safeguarding and enhancement.

The exploration of different thematic fields (ethnography, history, architecture, botany, landscape, etc.) aims at:

- Analysing the context of the alpine pastures, thus reconstructing a key component of the history of the Malësi e Madhe area;
- Surveying the alpine settlements and recording them in a geodatabase using GIS technology;
- Documenting the architecture of the mountain huts and the traditional building techniques;
- Favouring the exchange and comparison of information concerning the subject with international networks and partners who have carried out similar research;
- Offering ideas and food for thought for the enhancement of the alpine pastures, both on the policy level and in practice.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.9 Drafting of an integrated project for the enhancement of the alpine pastures of Razëm

The enhancement of mountain huts requires a multi-sectoral and integrated project, which, from the point of view of touristic promotion, systematises a series of coordinated actions.

These actions should be aimed simultaneously at the following objectives: (1) redevelopment of mountain hut settlements and their road accesses, (2) development of pastoral/transhumant activities and pastures management, and (3) promotion of typical dairy products and of other products related to the pastoral tradition.

A.9.1 Recovering the identity-ascribing elements of the alpine mountain hut landscape

The Action proposes to:

- Recover the common wells of the alpine pastures of Kastrat, Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë and the drinking (*korita*) and feeding (*gjollë me rrasë guri*) troughs;
- Restore and/or preserve the dry-stone walls – biotopes for plants and animals – and the traditional timber enclosures;
- Preserve and redevelop the mountain huts;
- Maintain the pastures.

All these components, in addition to determining the landscape, ethnographic and cultural value of the place, together establish a ‘brand’ which can increase the commercial value of the dairy products and qualify the tourist image of the alpine pastures^(b). To this end the use of local materials and traditional building techniques is recommended.

In the case of works which do not require special skills (for example repairing the dry-stone walls, planting hedges, etc.), unemployed inhabitants could be recruited, after being adequately trained^(c); in all other cases, local qualified workmanship and artisans should be employed.

Works could be funded by non-governmental entities or by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development itself, and managed by the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe. This type of investment could also generate a stable income for the inhabitants of the village of Vrith-Razëm, thus also helping to maintain and pass on the tradition of working with the local stone and timber.

A.9.2 Improving connectivity between Razëm and the alpine pastures

In order to overcome the isolation of the alpine pastures of Razëm, better safeguard the landscape heritage and encourage tourist usage, it is necessary to improve their accessibility.

In particular, the following works are suggested:

- For the Alpine pasture of Kastrat, the recommendation is to build a new road, following the design criteria used for forest roads in protected areas;
- For the Alpine pastures of Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë it is necessary to repair the existing roads so as to ensure appropriate usability. We suggest maintaining them as a “dirt roads” and limiting vehicular access exclusively to the shepherds and other users of the mountain huts.

In both cases, it is necessary to provide the roads with appropriate signage and rest areas.

A.9.3 Enhancing the alpine pastures as a tourist resource

The Action aims at promoting the development of coordinated initiatives together with the shepherds and the local communities, in order to increase the usage of the mountain huts and the competitiveness of Razëm in terms of tourism.

In this regard the suggestion is to:

Carry out a survey and mapping of the existing mountain huts, both abandoned and still in use;

- Promote mountain hut settlements through integrated communication projects (Internet site, printed guides, publications, signage, etc.) that enhance the natural, landscape and ethno-cultural features of the area;
- Promote alpine dairy products through initiatives addressed to visitors (providing information on farms where it is possible to eat or buy dairy products and/or participate in their production; organising eco-touristic, educational-environmental and recreational events) (see Action A.6, chap. II.1);
- Enhance usage and enjoyment of alpine pastures while considering the needs of different groups of users (families, schools, hikers, etc.) through the establishment of guided thematic itineraries.

A.9.4 Promoting community management of alpine pastures and forms of support for developing tourism

The integrated project for the enhancement of the alpine pastures presented in the previous Actions requires a bottom-up participative approach centred on the shepherds and synergistically supported by the inhabitants of the village of Vrith-Razëm, the local entities and the NGOs operating in the area. To that end, a community management of the alpine pastures could be envisaged. By re-proposing the ancient tradition of the *madra*, albeit in new forms, the historical, cultural and economic value of mountain huts could be safeguarded^(d).

A.10 Enhancing the trail network

See A.13, chap. I.3.

A.11 Promoting the territorial knowledge through soft mobility

This Action proposes the establishment of a network of thematic tourist routes or experience-trails for enhancing the variety of landscapes in the area of Razëm and of the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel, as well as for favouring the knowledge and respect for nature and promoting forms of active, responsible and sustainable tourism. These routes should be explored on foot to foster the knowledge of landscape landmarks, as well as the connectivity and permeability of the area. Mixed-use trails (on foot, on horseback and by bicycle) can be identified on the basis of their features (width, slope, road surface, etc.) (see CAI, 2010).

The following routes are proposed:

- *The Alpine Pastures Route*, which winds at a high altitude among pastures and forests and allows the tourists to walk across the alpine pastures of Razëm and of the surrounding villages;
- *The Route of the Caves of the Park of Shkrel*, which traverses the *Shpella e Shtogut* in Razëm and the *Shpella e Pëllumbave* in Reç;
- *The Ancient Transhumance Trail*, which follows the ancient shepherd tracks and is connected to the *Feast of the Alpine pastures* (see A.9, chap. II.2) or other events related to sheep-rearing and to the tasting of typical products (see A.7, chap. II.1);
- *The Trails of Biodiversity*, which use the existing roads and are aimed at letting visitors interested in botany discover the natural habitats and high biodiversity of the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel, including a visit to the primeval forest of Vermosh as the main attraction.

In order for these routes to have an effective impact on the area, a strong marketing action is needed, together with the support of the local community, beginning with the shepherds and the trekking guides of the Regional Natural Park of Shkrel.

S7 Management Strategies

A.12 Entrusting the management of the hiking network of the Natural Regional Park of Shkrel to a single entity

See A.15, chap. I.3.

In the case under examination, the promotion and maintenance of the trail network of the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe could be entrusted to the Association of the Albanian Alps (Shoqata e Alpeve Shqipëtare).

Notes

- a) See “Il paesaggio dell’Alpe” educational project, promoted by the Fondo Ambiente Italiano-FAI: <<https://www.fondoambiente.it/il-fai/scuola/progetti-fai-scuola/educazione-ambientale/>>.
- b) See <http://www.paesaggiotrentino.it/documenti/Documentazione/Documenti%20dell%20Osservatorio/D02_Dieci%20azioni%20paesaggio%20rurale.pdf>.
- c) See the “DYNALP – Dynamic Rural Alpine Space” project and, in particular, the pilot project undertaken in the Municipality of Röhthis (Austria) (See <<https://alpenallianz.org/it/progetti/dynalp/dynalp-relazione-finale/>>). On this topic see also the “Valorizzazione multifunzionale degli alpeggi del Parco Naturale Adamello Brenta” (see <<https://www.pnab.it/info/area-download/>>).
- d) An example that can be referred to in this context is the Rete pastorale alpina in Italia. See <http://www.ruralpini.it/Rete_past_alp.html>.

Settlement and buildings

Historical overview

The earliest information about Razëm was recorded by Theodor Ippen, the Austro-Hungarian consul in Shkodër between 1884 and 1887, and also author of a series of texts devoted to the North of Albania. In his words, the plateau of Razëm is praised for the beauty of its pastures, which lie among the mountains Veleçik and Kunora, and for the abundance of high-elevation water springs (see Karaiskaj & Klosi, 2002). The name Razëm itself seems to be linked to the Austro-Hungarian presence in the territory, and was apparently given in commemoration of an officer called Rado or Rasko, who had fallen in battle.

Prior to this period there is some historical evidence that records the settlement of Vrith, referred to as “Verli” in the late 17th century maps drafted by Vincenzo Coronelli¹ and Giacomo Cantelli² (Armao, 1933). Since these maps are almost coeval and include the same toponymic errors (see Armao, 1933), it can be supposed that they were based on the same older maps.

The consolidation of Razëm as a tourist destination took place in the Twenties, when a complex of villas began to be built (see chap. II.5), a courageous and novel initiative that would change the aspect of the village and condition its history during the years of the Communist regime.

¹ Between 1688 and 1697, Coronelli (1650-1718) drafted an atlas entitled *Corso Geografico Universale* (Venice, 1692). It includes the map *Corso delli fiumi Drino e Boiana nella Dalmatia* (datable to 1688) in which Vrith appears as “Verli” (De Ferrari, 1983).

² Cantelli (1643-1695) mentions Vrith (“Verli”) on the map *Albania propria ovvero superiore detta anche Macedonia occidentale descritta con disegni fatti sul luogo*, included in his *Mercurio Geografico* (Rome, 1689).

The residential area

Razëm – a hamlet of the village of Vrith – is located 24 km from the nearest town (Koplik) and 40 km from Shkodër. The only existing road (provincial road SH42) has some winding and unsafe sections, which tend to slow down vehicular traffic (Fig. II-4.1).

Razëm presents the distinctive features of a pre-alpine settlement, with scattered groups of houses connected by paths and winding roads that climb the sloping landscape to reach dwellings at higher altitudes.

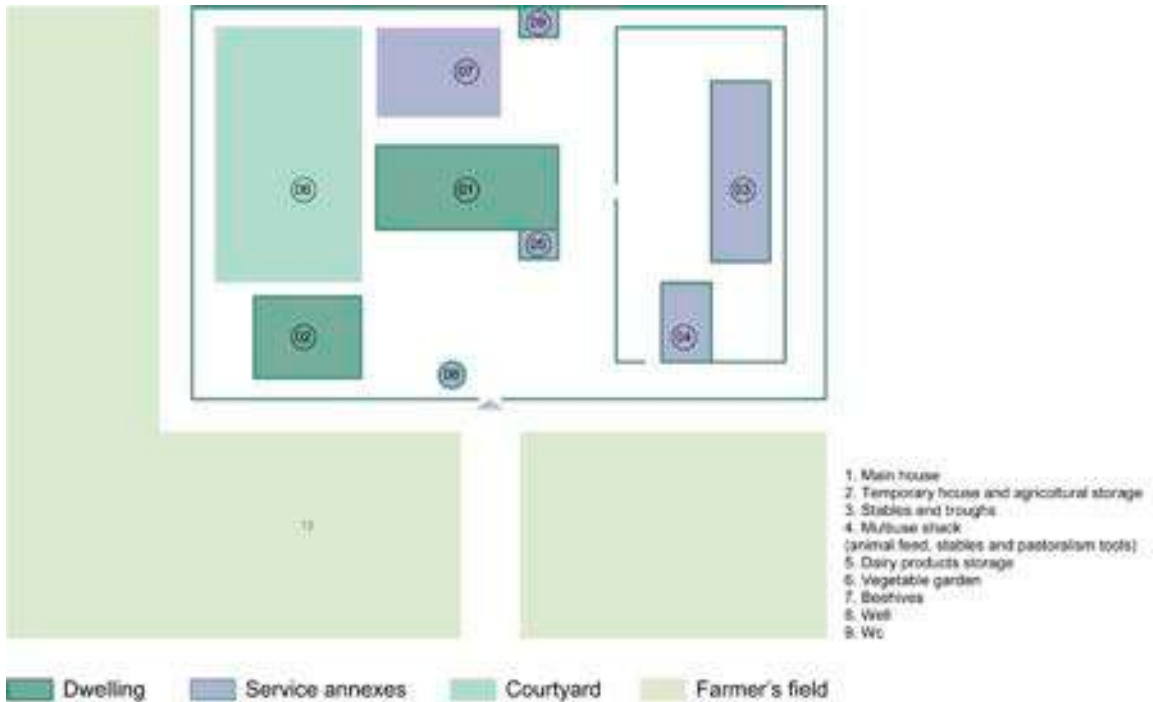
The area includes a residential nucleus (Shtogë) located to the west, near the slopes of Mount Veleçiku i Vogël, the tourist quarter (centre of Razëm), located on an elongated cavity surrounded by pine and beech woods, and three mountain hut settlements scattered in a vast surface and at a high altitude (Fig. II-4.2).



Figure II-4.1
A view of Vrith
from the winding
road that leads to
Razëm.



Figure II-4.2
A view of the centre
of Razëm.



The centre of Razëm consists of buildings linearly placed along the road and some accommodation facilities located in an equipped green area known as “Sheshi i Razmës” (Razëm Square), which serves as the centre of the settlement. The urban layout is scarcely structured. The buildings express an often-inconsistent architectural language compared to the identity features of the Albanian Alps building tradition. An exception to this are the historical villas that stand somewhat autonomously within the hamlet, creating a particularly valuable landscape micro-system (see chap. II.5).

Like Shtogë, also Vrith is a residential settlement with a fabric that is rhythmized by cultivated fields and scattered houses, enclosed among the slopes of the surrounding mountains.

The traditional dwellings of Vrith/Razëm

Typological features

The traditional dwellings were isolated buildings surrounded by a large enclosed courtyard³. In Vrith the dry-stone walls are still a distinctive sign of the landscape. The courtyard included the agricultural annexes and stables, the well (and/or cistern), the vegetable garden and, occasionally, the beehives. Outside the courtyard were the agricultural fields or the pastures belonging to the family (Fig. II-4.3).

During the on-field analysis, several dwellings were studied. Here follows the description of three houses that may be considered representative of the rural houses of the area;

³ Enclosures were usually not higher than the abdomen of an adult person; the most common were in dry-stone walls or in woven fence of branches, although some enclosures were made using a combination of these two techniques.

Figure II-4.3
A layout scheme
of a traditional
dwelling and its
annexes in the
village of Vrith.
[Author: Dritan
Kapo]

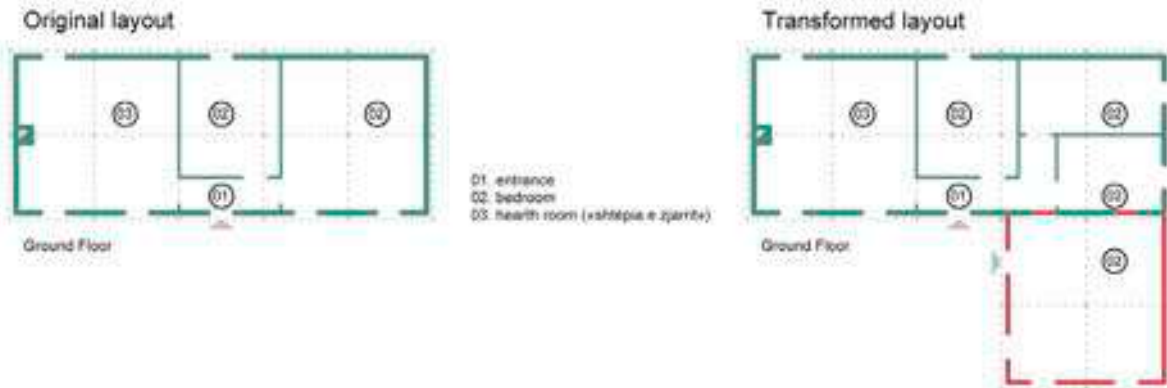


Figure II-4.4 Hypothesis on the original layout of the domestic space and further expansion of the first analysed dwelling. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

their original layout has been hypothetically reconstructed starting from the identification of the latest additions that were directly observed on-site.

The first is an isolated one-level house on flat ground; the second is an isolated two-storey house on a slope, together with annexes and surrounded by a wide enclosure⁴; the third is a two-storey house consisting of several units and also located on a slope. The three examples, although different in terms of ground slope, size and number of floors, all have in common the fact that they were built to accommodate a single-family nucleus. With the passage of time and the extension of the family through the marriage of sons⁵, the dwellings underwent a transformation process due to the increase of the family nuclei. They have been subjected to a subdivision of the interior space into several separate units, independently accessible from the outside, and/or to the addition of new volumes. This process can be deduced from the analysis of the doors, windows and stairs, which have been visibly added to the original buildings at later dates.

The first house to be analysed (currently in a state of ruin) has a rectangular plan with a 2:5 ratio to the sides. The original configuration consisted of three spaces: the first was the room of the hearth (*shtëpia e zjarrit*), which is the main space of domestic life, also used as a guest room (*oda e miqve*); the second was the bedroom of the sons; the third, of a larger size, was the master bedroom. The need to accommodate a second family nucleus led to the construction of a multi-use additional volume with an independent access that also included a hearth and a room with a double bed. This addition took place 'by rotation', thus resulting in the current L-shaped layout (Fig. II-4.4).

The second house dates back to the 19th century and belonged to Dasho Shkreli, a war hero of North Albania (Fig. II-4.5 and II-4.6 above).

It consisted of a single structure including two rooms at ground level and two other rooms on the first floor; also this building is currently in a state of ruin. Originally, one of the ground floor rooms was probably used as a stable while the other housed the hearth. On the first floor were located the bedrooms of the family members and the guest room with an independent access from the outside. An L-shaped interior staircase connected the two levels. When the need arose to accommodate an additional family nucleus, the house was divided in two along its vertical axis. The ground floor was used mostly for the bedrooms, the hearth was moved to the first floor and the guest room was sacrificed.

⁴ According to Muka *et al.* (2004), this house belongs to the most representative and valued typology in the Albanian Alps.

⁵ In the traditional Albanian family only the sons remained in the family house after marriage.



In its current configuration, the third house consists of a building aggregate made of different units. The original structure was a small square volume with two superimposed levels: the ground floor must have housed the hearth and the upper floor the bedroom. The staircase was exterior, on the upper side of the building. The building might have developed in three phases. The first two phases were probably characterised by the addition of new volumes ‘by translation’ on the short side of the building, doubling and then tripling the original house. The result was thus a tripartite building – with the entrance, hallway and staircase in a central position and two lateral rooms per floor – a dominant typology throughout the entire Albania. In the third phase, instead, the addition probably concerned single-storey facilities (kitchen, toilet, etc.), placed on the lower side of the building (Figs. II-4.6 *below* and II-4.7).

Figure II-4.5
A view of the house that once belonged to Dasho Shkreli.

Building features

Traditional buildings have foundations in stone made with large irregular blocks. The load-bearing walls are made of uncoursed rubble stone masonry (with an average thickness of 70 cm). Corners are carefully built with larger squared-off stones (50 to 70 cm long). Stone lintels (although some are made of reinforced concrete) are usually placed above the openings. In Dasho Shkreli’s house in Vrith an interesting tripartite lintel was found, as well as a mixed solution consisting of a stone lintel on the outside and a flat arch, also in stone, on the inside (Fig. II-4.8).

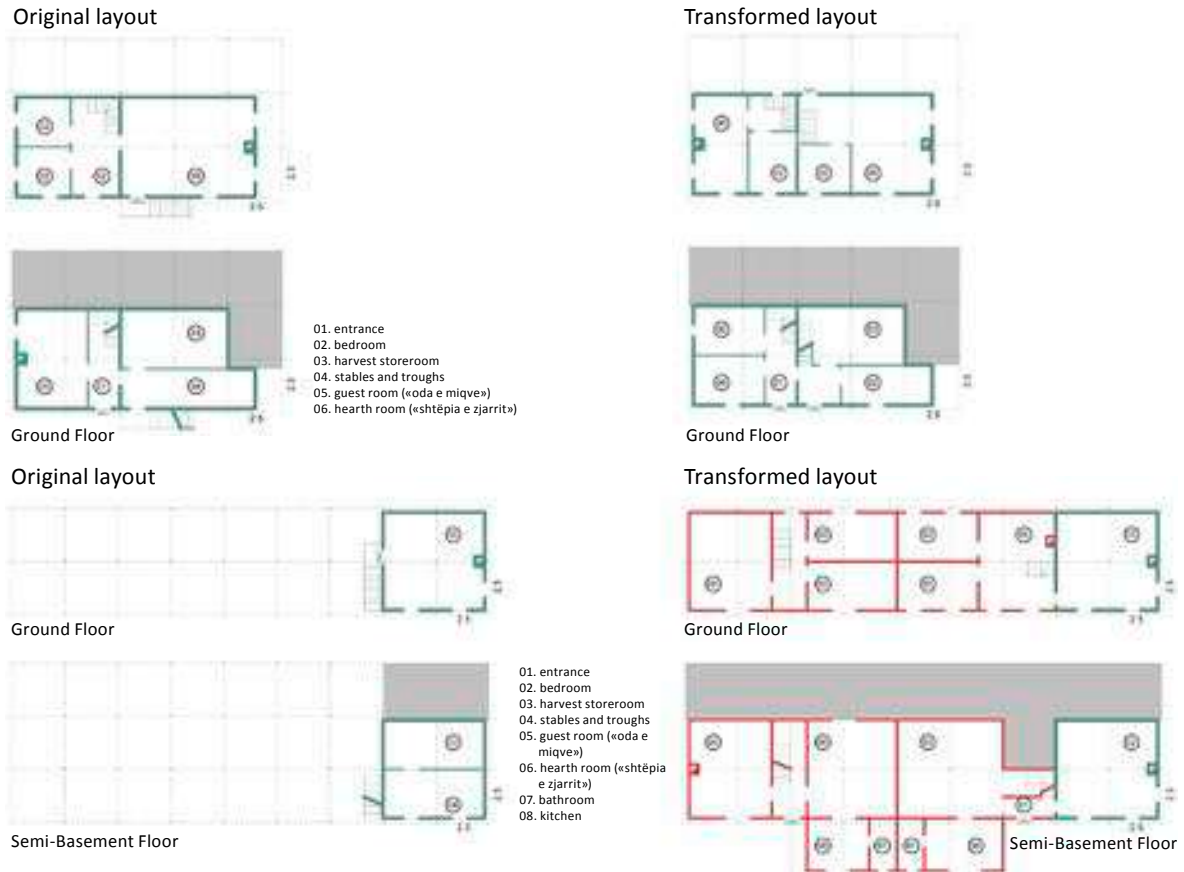


Figure II-4.6
Hypothesis on
the original
layout of the
domestic space and
transformations
that occurred
over time in the
second (*above*) and
the third (*below*)
analysed dwelling
in Razëm. [Author:
Dritan Kapo]

On the ground floors, the spaces used for dwelling are paved with stone slabs directly placed on the ground, or else in beaten concrete; the paving of storerooms and stables are usually made of rammed earth.

The intermediate floors are made of timber with bearers, joists and decking boards. In rooms used for residential purposes, the ceiling is often covered with wooden planks to create a false ceiling.

The roof is generally hipped, but there are also half-hipped roofs. The roof is trussed (with king post and struts) with purlins spanning between the trusses. The covering of the roof is usually made of Marseille tiles (Fig. II-4.9).

Partitions are made with a timber frame that includes studs (floor to ceiling) onto which are fixed crosspieces (small wooden boards or simple branches), while the remaining spaces are filled with mortar mixed with plant elements or small stone pieces. These walls (as well as all interior walls) are covered with a lime mortar plaster (Fig. II-4.10).

Interior stairs, generally L-shaped, have a timber structure consisting of two lateral stringers that support rectangular and triangular steps.

In most cases, there is a fireplace in precast concrete⁶, located in the middle of the wall (Fig. II-4.11).

⁶ According to Muka (2007), the new precast concrete fireplaces (known as *alla franga*, meaning “new”, “of a modern type”), started to become widespread throughout Albania since the Twenties and Thirties.



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Figure II-4.7 – A view of the third analysed dwelling.

Figure II-4.8 – The tripartite lintel of the Shkreli house.



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Figure II-4.9. – Trusses in a house of Vrith.

Figure II-4.10 – A detail of a timber partition.



Figure II-4-11
The interior of a traditional dwelling with a wooden false ceiling and a widespread type of fireplace.

The mountain huts of the alpine pastures of Razëm

There are three alpine pastures in the area of Razëm: (1) Kastrat, is the oldest, (2) Krenashdol, established during the Communist era on an ex-agricultural terrain, and (3) Fushë Zezë, established after the Nineties following the abandonment of a military building and a lumbering factory that deforested the area, thus creating pastures for the shepherds.

Whereas Kastrat has a compact layout, the other are more widespread, with the mountain huts placed around the grazing areas and separate from each other.

Typological features

The alpine settlements consist of mountain huts that present the same morphological and dimensional features. They are compact, one-storey, rectangular constructions with a hipped roof (Fig. II-4.12).

The mountain huts are divided into two sections: the shepherd's hut (*kasollja e barinjve*), where the shepherd lives and the cheese is produced through the processing of raw materials, and the enclosed space (*vatha e bagëtime*), used for sheltering and milking the animals. The shepherd's hut is usually divided into two different spaces, but it is not unusual to find examples with a single multi-purpose room in which the shepherds' living quarters and the dairy production share the same space. Some mountain huts have a mezzanine that is used as a storeroom or for maturing cheese.

The analysis of the existing structures revealed that several mountain huts, having lost their original function, were converted into private vacation dwellings.



Figure II-4.12
A mountain hut in
the alpine pasture
of Kastrat.



Figure II-4.13
A timber mountain
hut in the alpine
pasture of Fushë
Zezë.

Building features

The mountain huts are characterised by the extensive use of calcareous stone for the masonry and of timber for the structure and covering of the roofs. There are also some structures built entirely with timber, mostly abandoned (Fig. II-4.13).

The walls are built in dry rubble stone masonry; the use of mortar is limited to buildings that are more recent. The openings, with stone lintels, are generally small.

The traditional roof consists of a timber structure formed by trusses on which joists are placed, at a distance of 50-55 cm from each other. Wooden shingles, approximately 60 cm long, cover this structure. In many cases the original roof covering has been replaced with metal sheets.

The enclosures of the *vatha e bagëtime* consist of wooden picket fences or of dry-stone walls built of erratic boulders. Many buildings have been renovated without consid-



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ering the typical features of the local architecture. The most discordant elements are undoubtedly the metal roofing sheets.

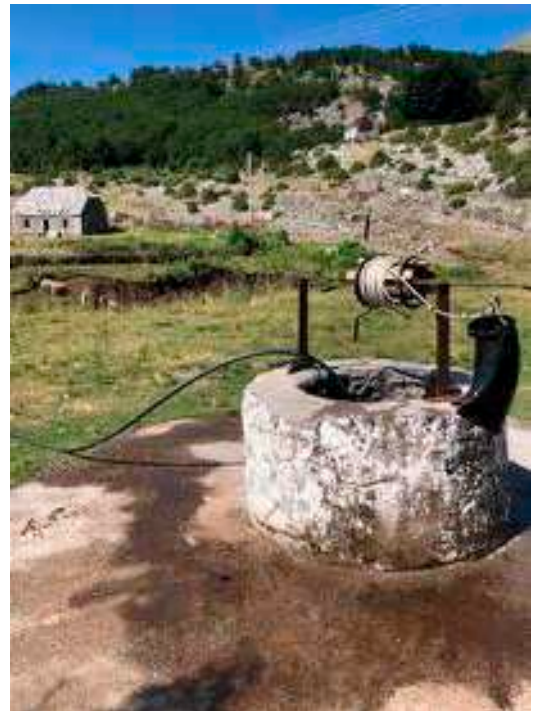
State of conservation of traditional buildings

Both in the villages and in the alpine pastures, the analysed buildings have revealed the same problems. Years of neglect and abandonment have erased some of the typical features of the built landscape. Many buildings are in a state of ruin; in some instances, it is difficult even to read their original configuration.

The introduction of alien materials and components and the demolition of traditional buildings in order to replace them with modern ones (in particular in the centre of Razëm which is under greater speculative pressure) are two expressions of the inhabitants' poor awareness of the need to safeguard their roots and also the proof of a lack of general policies towards the preservation of the cultural heritage.

As for the state of conservation, two different groups can be identified: inhabited and uninhabited buildings. The former present elements of decay and failure (cracks, out-of-plumb walls, loss of materials, bulging, etc.) which are limited, all things considered. The latter, on the other hand, when not in ruins, are in serious structural conditions, including collapsed floors and roofs.

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the uninhabited buildings, which together with those that are more difficult to access with vehicles (e.g. the alpine pasture of Kastrat), that better preserve the features of traditional building and are useful for reconstructing a history of local traditional building.



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Figure II-4.14 – The Sheshi i Razmës.

Figure II.4.15 – A well in the alpine pasture of Krenashdol.

Regarding the mountain huts, we can add that the processes of failure and decay have been accelerated by the severity of the climate and by the temporary and technologically poor conception of the buildings.

Public space

The *Kanun* has influenced both individual and collective social life and behaviour for centuries in the area of Malësi e Madhe. The society regulated by the *Kanun* is rooted in a patriarchal social system and in the concept of *fis* (the lineage) (Kasteleti *et al.*, 2009). “Social space – writes Collina (2011) – lies within the house, and is reserved to the extended family unit”. For this reason, here more than in other rural Albanian contexts, the concept of public space – understood as a system of living places that ensure and offer the values of sociality, of interaction, as well as of social cohesion and individual development (see Belfiore, 2014) – does not belong to the culture of the place. In Vrith, for example, there is no square, no parks, and no recreational areas for children⁷.

In the centre of Razëm, instead, there is a green area (Sheshi i Razmës) used for collective activities and for grazing. It houses nine wells distributed in an apparently random pattern on an almond-shape surface (Fig. II-4.14). There is no historical knowledge about their origin. According to the locals, the wells were built during the 19th century. What is certain is that the community recognises the ‘wells square’ as a place of memory (see chap. I.2). The curbs of some of the wells were recently restored (2014) with less than ideal materials and techniques.

The wells, in addition to being a vital source of drinking water, are a unique component of the Malësi e Madhe landscape (Nopcsa, 2013). They were placed in the courtyards of houses, as well as in public spaces, usually next to drinking troughs (*korita*). Similar works can be found along the road from Vrith to Razëm (*Pusi i Befcës*) and in the alpine pastures (Fig. II-4.15).

To the south-west of the Sheshi i Razmës lie the historical villas, immersed in an impressive landscape characterised by centuries-old trees and dry-stone walls (see chap. II.5). This area shows features similar to those of a park, and tourists (especially on summer weekends) use it as a picnic area. Unfortunately, it is not well maintained (also due to the disrespectful behaviour of the tourists) and is not equipped as a rest area for visitors.

Infrastructure network

Due to the scarce availability of surface water resources (rivers and streams), water has always been a problem for the inhabitants of Vrith/Razëm. In order to address this, they have developed two main water supply methods: (1) wells, and (2) underground cisterns for collecting rainwater. Since an obsolete water supply network currently supplies the village, for non-drinking purposes the inhabitants still use the wells and cisterns, whereas bottled water is used for drinking. In periods of drought, tank trucks supply water.

A similar problem concerns the supply of electricity, whose distribution network was installed in 1969 and never renovated. According to the villagers, power blackouts

⁷ The absence of recreational spaces was also highlighted by the school headmaster of Vrith – Gasper Purashaj – who, in order to overcome this issue, often allows the students to use the schoolyard after the school hours. (Interview given in Vrith on 15.06.2019).

are common. To make up for this, accommodation facilities and some residences use fossil-fuel electric generators that are both polluting and noisy.

Razëm and Vrith do not have a sewage system. The disposal of blackwaters takes place mainly through leaching cesspools buried in the courtyards, whereas greywater are simply dispersed on the ground without any filtering.

Another critical aspect (which concerns the entire area of Malësi e Madhe) is the absence of a public rubbish disposal and treatment system. In Razëm and in Vrith domestic waste is thrown in a dump located just outside the village and periodically burnt by the inhabitants themselves, with consequences for both public health and the environment. In both locations there is a limited number of rubbish bins for mixed garbage that are emptied now and then. The problems described here are obviously worsened during the summer due to the tourists' presence.

The enhancement and renovation of infrastructure networks is included as part of the territorial development contemplated by the Malësi e Madhe Town Plan (Plani i Përgjithshëm Vendor Bashkia Malësi e Madhe – PPV) and the Guidelines of the Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps (Plani Kombëtar Sektorial i Turizmit për Rajonin e Alpeve Shqiptare). Concerning tourist locations, such as Razëm, the former addresses the problem of upgrading the electric network the renovation of the water supply network, and the installation of public lighting in open public spaces and along the main roads (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe – Strategjia Territoriale, 2017: 106-107); the latter recommends the optimisation of a waste collection and disposal system and the construction of a sewage network and of a waste water treatment plant (MTM - Strategjia Sektoriale, 2017: 228-229, 231).

As for mountain hut settlements, the state of infrastructures is equally critical. The electric network supplies only the alpine pastures of Fushë Zezë and Krenashdol, whereas the water supply depends exclusively on communal wells. Waste is dumped in the open and periodically burnt.

The centre of Razëm has a good Internet connection; the quality of the signal diminishes in the mountainous areas and becomes very weak in the alpine pastures (for example in the pasture of Fushë Zezë)⁸. An upgrading of the signal is envisaged by the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan, which is aimed at enhancing coverage through the installation of new antennas and of a fibre-optic Internet cable (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe – Strategjia Territoriale, 2017: 108).

Public services, shops and tourist facilities

Razëm lacks the public services that are usual in mountain tourist destinations. The only exception is a first-aid medical office that is open, however, only during the summer months⁹. The recent closing of the tourism information point in the nearby village of Dedaj has worsened this situation.

Public transport depends entirely on private agencies, which in summer organise daily tours or else on a village driver who offers daily trips from Razëm to Koplík in his minivan.

⁸ See <<https://pcworld.al/operatore-t-celulare-publikojne-hartat-e-mbulimit-me-rrjet-2g-3g-dhe-4g/>>.

⁹ From June to September, the medical office is open 24 hours a day from Friday to Sunday and from 8:00 to 15:00 from Monday to Thursday. The rest of the year, a nurse from the village is on hand only in case of an emergency. For cases that are more serious it is necessary to go to the first-aid medical office in Koplík.

As far as shops and tourism facilities are concerned, in Razëm there are 1 resort, 2 hotels, 2 guest houses (that also serve as restaurants), 1 hostel and 2 bars. In Vrith there are 2 small general stores and 2 bars (July, 2020).

Critical issues and future prospects

Razëm has a high tourism vocation thanks to the scenic alpine landscape, the high-altitude pastures and the presence of numerous other meaningful places. Tourism struggles to take off due to problems with accessibility, the lack of infrastructure, services and planned attractions, its very high dependence on the season and a still inadequate territorial marketing.

Another serious obstacle to the development of tourism is the lack of ownership titles for houses and land, which often generates conflicts and greatly limits investments in the region.

The Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps envisages an increase in accommodation facilities by 2031, which includes the diversification of accommodation structures (MTM – Plani i Zhvillimit të Sektorit, 2017: 79). In order to obtain lasting results that are compatible with the fragile environmental balances, the offer in terms of tourism should be oriented towards the recovery and enhancement of the existing built heritage and of all the resources capable of evoking the memory, identity and typical features of the place.

In order to mitigate dependency on the season, it is necessary to diversify the touristic amenities (sports, ecology, culinary, natural, etc.), and encourage winter tourism, which is currently marginal.

An important contribution could be offered through the redevelopment of the complex of villas and, especially, by the enhancement of the mountain hut settlements, which provide a great socio-economic opportunity. They can contribute to forms of experiential tourism, as well as to the continuity and enhancement of the traditional dairy production and to landscape preservation.

Intervention strategies

S2 Planning Strategies

A.1 Registering of real estate

The absence of ownership titles is common in the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe (see Law no. 7501 of 1991).

In order to correctly plan the territorial development of the area, it is of foremost importance to recognise and file all real estate property titles in the land registry office. This measure regards especially the owners of abandoned buildings and those interested in promoting real estate investment, since the recognition of ownership is the basis for obtaining bank loans.

To fulfil this aim, strong support is needed from the public administration, which should appoint competent personnel to provide guidance and support for the owners during the procedure of registration in the land registry office.

S3 Social Cohesion Strategies

A.2 Creating a Community and Artisan Centre

See A.2, sect. I.4.2

The NGO VIS Albania – member of the ANRD and operating in the area of Malësi e Madhe since 2009 – is already working in this direction through the organisation of events linked in particular with the emancipation of women from the social and work points of view, such as the "Pro donne rurali"^(a) and "Zana e maleve"^(b) projects.. This Centre could be located in the former school of Vrith.

S4 Living Quality Strategies

A.3 Upgrading of the technological systems in the houses of the village

As part of the priority phase for the years 2017-2031, the Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps recommends a series of works for completing the water supply network and for the *ex novo* construction of the sewage system in all the tourist locations in the region^(c). The renovation of the electricity network and the installation of a public lighting plant, instead, are priority works envisaged by the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan.

Meanwhile, and in accordance with the provisions of the above-mentioned Plans, it would be advisable to intervene on the buildings (accommodation structures and dwellings), carrying out the following adaptation works:

- Renovate obsolete plumbing including the replacement of ducts for avoiding waste due to loss or malfunctions;
- Promote the installation of systems for collecting rainwater^(d) and repair/replace the existing cisterns (to be used for non-drinking purposes, such as irrigation of green areas, flushing toilets, etc.);
- Promote systems for generating electricity from renewable sources^(e);
- Replace the current leaching cesspools with adequate bio septic tanks and adopt depuration systems;
- Separate black and grey water effluent streams to optimise the recycling of greywater for alternative use.

These works would help to complete the system of infrastructure networks provided for by the Plans; if conceived in accordance with the criteria of environmental sustainability they would also ensure energy savings and the protection of the environment.

In order to support the works on the buildings it is necessary to ensure adequate funding solutions (e.g. micro-credit)^(f).

A.4 Upgrading of some sections of the existing vehicular roads and construction of a public parking area

With the purpose of enhancing the tourism development of the village it would be necessary to repair some sections of the road between Razëm and Koplik and build a public parking area with 70-80 parking spaces (as envisaged by the Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps), to be located in an appropriate area in the proximity of the centre of Razëm.

For the recommendations about the parking area see A.7, sect. I.4.1.

A.5 Establishing a public transport line

This Action aims at enhancing both the quality of life of the inhabitants and the development of tourism, it is necessary to provide a public transportation service that connects Vrith/Razëm to Koplik and Shkodër. This service could vary depending on the season depending on the mobility requirements of both inhabitants and visitors.

A.6 Providing services for the cultural and tourist usage and enjoyment of the area

For the undertaking of activities related to tourism, in Razëm there are currently some accommodation facilities, the public green area (Sheshi i Razmës) that is often used for recreational activities, and the green areas connected to the historical villas, a part of which is used by tourists as a picnic site.

The lack of essential tourism services makes of Razëm a weak tourist destination.

In order to fill this gap, this Action proposes the establishment of:

- A tourism information centre, including an ATM;
 - A shop for tasting and purchasing typical products, in particular dairy products from the mountain huts of the Alpine pastures of Kastrat, Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë.
-

A.7 Ensuring water and electricity supply in the alpine pastures

In the three alpine pastures of Razëm, the water available to the mountain huts is supplied by common wells. This water serves both as drinking water for the shepherds and the animals and for the dairy production activities.

In view of enhancing the dwelling quality of the mountain huts and boosting forms of eco-sustainable tourism, we suggest a better usage of the available water resources through: (1) the creation of watering holes, (2) the collection of rainwater from roofs and its storage in underground cisterns and, if necessary, and (3) the construction of new wells for supplying drinking water.

The water supply through wells can offer tourists the experience of the authentic life of the mountain huts, a Spartan lifestyle and far-removed from the usual comforts. It is however necessary to verify the quality of the water from the wells; if it were not drinkable it would be necessary to install an appropriate purification system.

As for electricity, it must be remembered that only the alpine pastures of Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë are supplied by the electricity network (which shares the same problems concerning supply as the village). In the case of the alpine pasture of Kastrat, in order to fulfill the needs of the shepherds and in view of a possible development of tourism (equipment for processing and keeping milk, pumps for the water from wells, small appliances, etc.), photovoltaic energy could be the best solution. Of course, it is necessary to establish specific usage parameters and criteria to limit as much as possible the impact of this equipment on the mountain landscape.

A.8 Waste water treatment in the alpine pastures

Treatment of wastewater in the alpine pastures is a particularly complex issue. The question lies in finding a solution for overcoming the difficulty of connecting this wastewater to the sewage network (which, for that matter, is still absent in Vrith-Razëm) and for safeguarding the water tables in view of the development of tourism. Tourism, although sustainable, will nonetheless have an impact on the environment. In these contexts, it is necessary to add a secondary filtering treatment to the usual septic tanks. Considering that the mountain huts are used in the summer and with the hope of preserving the current balance between the built and natural environments, a possible solution for treating secondary wastewater could be a phytodepuration system⁽⁸⁾.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.9 Investigating and cataloguing the built heritage in Razëm/Vrith and in the alpine pastures

See Phase 1, A.2, sect. I.4.1

A.10 Carrying out a feasibility study for the creation of a cross-country skiing trail

There are no skiing facilities in the Albanian Alps. The Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan proposes the establishment of skiing trails (and connected sport activities) in the village of Lepushë (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe - Strategjia territoriale, 2017: 254).

The land of Razëm is dominated by the majestic peaks of Mount Veleçik (1,724 m) and Mount Kunora (1,713 m) to the north, and of Mount Kunora of Zagora (1,862 m) to the east, all of which are partially covered by forests of pine and beech. The slopes and plateaus are covered in snow from December to March-April.

This Action aims at proposing a feasibility study for the creation of a cross-country skiing trail and its supporting structures in the area of Razëm. It could greatly contribute to a seasonal adjustment of tourism flows, liberating the tourism industry from its dependency on the summer season and thus becoming a fostering factor for economic and tourism development in the whole region of Shkodër.

A.11 Safety and conservation works to make dangerous buildings safe

See A.11, sect. I.4.1.

A.12 Safeguarding of the mountain hut settlements in Razëm(h).

This Action is an integral part of the activities envisaged in the *integrated project*, described in Action A.9 of chap. II.3., that combines building, economic, landscape and tourism development aspects. It aims at:

- Protecting the mountain hut settlements and the activities which are carried out in them;
- Determining the appropriate approach for safeguarding the morphological, dimensional and technological features of the building tradition.

In the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan, the alpine pasture of Kastrat is marked as “N2- Pasture” zone (Zoning: SH-08_N21_01), characterised by a ban on building. In this pasture, which presents the oldest settlement type, the huts may only require restoration and conservation works.

The alpine pasture of Krenashdol, identified in the Zoning Plan as “N2- Pasture” zone (Zoning: SH-08_N22_05), has a coefficient of land usage of 3% (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, Regullore Vendore, art. 95-96). Here, new buildings and refurbishment with a maximum height of two storeys, are allowed.

The Alpine pasture of Fushë Zezë, finally, is identified as an “A3- Rural mountain area” in which new buildings are permitted (Zoning: SH-08_A33_01), with a coefficient of land usage of 20% and a designated use as residential-accommodation. Also here, the maximum height contemplated for the buildings is two storeys (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, Regullore Vendore, art. 50).

If these measures were applied, the alpine pasture of Fushë Zezë would become a tourist settlement and the shepherds together with the activities of the mountain huts would gradually disappear.

It would therefore be appropriate to extend to the Alpine pastures of Fushë Zezë and Krenashdol the measures envisaged for Kastrat, or, failing that, to contemplate for both a coefficient of land usage less than or equal to 3% and limiting the height of new buildings to a single storey.

For the three alpine pastures our recommendation is also to:

- Preserve the double function (as temporary residence and production facility) of the mountain huts that are still active;
- Promote the conversion and reuse of abandoned huts as tourist accommodation.

In the case of the construction of new buildings or expansions of existing buildings it is advisable to:

- Ensure their insertion in the landscape through solutions that are consistent with the existing buildings and construction typologies, paying special attention to the facades (including doors and windows), and roofs;
 - Favour the use of local and/or eco-compatible materials;
 - Encourage technological solutions based on environmental sustainability and promote the construction of buildings that autonomously provide for their energetic needs by renewable sources.
-

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.13 Redevelopment of the Sheshi i Razmës and functional recovery of the nine historical wells

This Action proposes the redevelopment of the Sheshi i Razmës, in accordance with the idea of a flexible space linked to everyday life and/or community events.

For a successful outcome of the Action our suggestion is to:

- Apply the principles of inclusive design;
- Use paving patterns and materials that are coherent with the local context;
- Restore the well curbs;
- Design furniture made out of local materials and techniques and preferably built by local artists/artisans;
- Introduce autochthonous plant species;
- Provide for a low-energy and high-efficiency lighting system (see A.3).

Together with the redevelopment of the square it is necessary to carry out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the water from the wells (that are used by the adjacent accommodation facilities) in order to verify whether it is potable or else suitable for other uses.

A.14 Recovery and conversion of uninhabited buildings into traditional accommodation facilities⁶⁰.

See A.7, sect. I.4.2.

A.15 Improving the spaces used in the mountain huts for preparing and preserving dairy products

In their current state, the spaces used for the preparation of dairy products in the mountain huts in the alpine pastures of Kastrat, Krenashdol and Fushë Zezë do not have adequate sanitary conditions. In order to ensure food safety, as well as the quality and the image of the product, it is necessary to establish a clear separation between the living quarters and the spaces for preparing and preserving dairy products. In those cases where there is no available space in the existing huts, small additions could be made for housing the different production phases, for storing the cheese and selling the finished products. The tasting and sale of cheese could also take place in a communal space managed by the shepherds. Also important is the maintenance of the enclosed spaces (*vatha e bagëtime*) surrounding the pastures, which, with minimal works could become attractive places for visitors to stop for a rest, taste the dairy products and contemplate the beauty of the landscape.

A.16 Creating an eco-campground for promoting the principles of ecological tourism

The Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps recommends for the area of Razëm an increase and diversification of accommodation facilities to be undertaken as the main strategy for the development of tourism (MTM, 2017: 79). This includes the creation of a campground for 200 guests.

In accordance with this aim, we propose the construction of an eco-campground, based on the following design strategies:

- Construction of reversible structures, dry-assembled and with a low environmental impact;
- Use of sustainable building techniques, that envisage the use of local materials and traditional construction techniques (for example, uncoursed rubble stone walls, roofs covered in wooden shingles, dry-stone boundary walls, etc.);
- Use of renewable energy (solar thermal, heat pump, photovoltaic, micro wind turbines, etc.).

The recommendation is to locate the campground in the north-east area of the village, classified by the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan as a “Wood” zone (Natural system-zone N1: Wood-SH-08_N11_05) – where building operations are prohibited (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, Regullore Vendore, art. 92) – and also partially in the “Pasture” zone (N2- Pasture-SH-08_N22_07). The latter area has a coefficient of land usage (*koeficienti i shfrytëzimit të tokës*) equal to 3 % and allows only buildings with a maximum height of two storeys (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, Regullore Vendore, art. 96).

Our suggestion is to build only one-storey buildings and to locate the following spaces and services within the greenery:

- Reception and common areas;
- Spaces for campers and/or caravans;
- Spaces for tents;
- Bungalows and mobile homes;
- Picnic area;
- Playground;
- Toilets.

Considering the quality of the landscape, the aforementioned works should respect the landscape continuity of the pre-alpine context. Our specific recommendation is not to modify the existing vegetal structure (through the felling of trees and the elimination of riparian formations), but rather to enhance it with the addition of new autochthonous plant species.

Notes

- a) See <<https://www.facebook.com/VISnordAlb/posts/2510052219076753>>.
- b) See <<http://www.volint.it/vis/avviato-ilprogetto-%E2%80%9CZana-e-maleve-giovani-e-territorio%E2%80%9D>>.
- c) The Plan provides the general guidelines concerning the way of carrying out works, size of the ducts, hydrogeological pre-feasibility studies and other technical aspects, as well as principles for management and awareness raising among the locals regarding energy savings, reuse and recovery of water sources, environmental protection and disposal of wastewaters.
- d) Concerning the re-use of rainwater see <<http://www.idro.net/images/pdf/Il-riutilizzo-delle-acque.pdf>>.
- e) The Sectorial National Plan for Tourism in the Region of Albanian Alps suggests the use of centralised systems for domestic hot water and heating (MTM, 2017: 151-153).
- f) See, for instance, “Zana e maleve” project (<https://openaid.aics.gov.it/it/iati-activity/XM-DAC-6-4-011523-01-3>).

- g) See the UE Life+Bioaquae project: <http://www.bioaquae.eu/attachments/Fitodepurazione_Volume-Tecnico_PNGP_BIOAQUAE.pdf>.
- h) See Architettura e territorio alpino. Scenari di sviluppo e di riqualificazione energetico-edilizia del patrimonio costruito, <https://www.montagneinrete.it/uploads/tx_gorillary/berta_m-_dini_r-_de_rossi_a_corrado_f-_architettura_e_territorio_alpino_1482244343.pdf>.
- i) Regarding actions for enhancing the mountain huts see: Manuale per gli alpeggi - Uno strumento operativo per le malghe delle montagne di Valgrigna, <<https://www.ersaf.lombardia.it/it/file/3070/50805231/ManualeAlpeggi-Ver13b-09aprile2018.pdf>> and Buone pratiche gestionali delle malghe tra Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia e Carinzia (<http://www.ersa.fvg.it/export/sites/ersa/aziende/sperimentazione/Alpicoltura_friulana/Allegati-Alpeggio/buonepratichegestionalimalgheit.pdf>). Concerning redevelopment projects see: Valorizzazione multifunzionale degli alpeggi del Parco Naturale Adamello Brenta (TN) (<<https://www.pnab.it/info/area-download/?upf=dl&id=7897>>) and Valorizzazione multifunzionale degli alpeggi di Germenega e Siniciaga. Val Genova – Comune di Spiazzo (TN) (<<https://www.pnab.it/info/area-download/?upf=dl&id=7900>>).

Historical residential complex in Razëm

The complex of the historical villas in Razëm is located near the centre of the village, within a small wooded area that, also due to the fact that lies on a slope, serves as a transition point between the road and the buildings.

Approaching through the beech trees and pines and a series of steps, the buildings – eight overall – are gradually revealed (Figs. II-5.1 and II-5.2).

Although every villa has its own characteristics, a clear unitary logic links the buildings, not only visually, but also through a well-designed network of pathways. This is additionally strengthened by the orientation of the villas: the main facades are all facing an ideal centre of the ring path around which they are distributed.

The consistence of the architectural language and the presence of an interior network of pathways connecting the buildings seem to indicate a project designed by a single architect (unfortunately unknown), or at least the presence of a specific architectural 'school'.

Historical and typological framework

There is little historical information concerning the villas, all of which derives from the testimony of the inhabitants of the village and from some articles published on on-line local newspapers and magazines¹. Since it is not possible to reconstruct with documentary evidence the history of their construction, an analysis of the cultural context in which they are situated is proposed, in alternative.

¹ See: <<https://www.votramagazine.com/razma-guri-shndrites-ne-gjerdanin-e-turizmit-malor/> and <http://revista.mapo.al/razma-qyteza-e-zanave/>>.



Figure II-5.1 – Paths leading to the villas surrounded by beech trees and pines.



There is a widespread opinion that the villas were commissioned by some businessmen from the rich bourgeoisie of Shkodër during the Twenties and Thirties, a decision which may seem surprising for an outlying location such as Razëm. In fact, it must be considered that the discovery of the village as a holiday destination had occurred a few decades earlier, thanks to the presence of Austro-Hungarian garrisons in the region (Prifti K., 2002)².

One of the villas belonged to the family of the famous actress Tinka Kurti³ (see Fig. II-5.7). Tinka's father, who was from Shkodër, due to his political affiliation to the opposition against Ahmet Zogu led by Fan Noli, had been condemned to death and forced into exile⁴. It is thus presumed that the villa in Razëm was built before 1925, the year of the fall of Noli's brief government and the return to power of Zogu, who in 1928 became King of Albania under the name of Zog I (Prifti K. & Shpuza, 2007).

In the solutions adopted in the complex, it is easy to identify the influence of the architectural patterns used in Shkodër in the early 20th century. Shkodër had undergone significant transformations since the second half of the 19th century. Despite the Ottoman presence, the city showed clear signs of aperture to the West, confirmed also by the presence of French, English, Austrian, Russian, Greek and Montenegrin consulates (Luzati, 2012^a). After the catastrophic earthquake of 1905, a new 'Venetian' dwelling type, with compact volumes and a main facade on the street, began to become widespread thanks especially to the work of Kol Idromeno (1860-1939), a painter and architect from Shkodër who during his long career built approximately 100 buildings

Figure II-5.2
The location of the eight villas and their relationship with the road, the square and the church of Razëm.

² For reasons regarding specific geopolitical interests, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was present in the North of Albania since the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the right of protectorate over the Catholic institutions present in the territories of the Ottoman Empire. Of the 240 ecclesiastic institutions under Austro-Hungarian protection, 220 were in Albania.

³ See <<http://revista.mapo.al/razma-qyteza-e-zanave/>>.

⁴ On the house of the Kurti family in Razëm see: <<http://lajmetshqip.com/tinka-kurti-ju-rrefej-orijjininen-time-hungareze/> and <<https://revista.gazetamapo.al/razma-qyteza-e-zanave/>>.

(Luzati, 2012^b)⁵. This dwelling type – implemented, above all, on the so-called Shëtitorja Populllore) – distances itself from the traditional Albanian house⁶ (Riza, 1991; 2010; Prifti Sh., 1976; 1979; 2001) and became established toward the late Twenties under the reign of Zog I, who was known for his aperture toward other European nations, especially Italy.

From the information gathered on-site it appears that during the Communist regime, the villas of Razëm were expropriated and converted into summer camps for workers (*kamp pushimi*). The process of restitution of the villas to their legitimate owners, which began with the arrival of democracy, has proven difficult. Because of the inheritance transfers from generation to generation, the owners of each building, in fact, are numerous and not always known. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the state of disrepair that most of the villas are currently in⁷.

From the point of view of the architectural language, the villas share some common traits.

First of all, they express a simplified version of the residential typology designed by Idromeno for Shkodër and an attempt towards a local interpretation of the ‘holi-



Figure II-5.3
The Red Villa,
one of the most
representative
buildings of
the complex, as
example of a “house
with krevet”.

⁵ Kol Idromeno studied at the Venice Academy of Fine Arts between 1875 and 1878 (Luzati², 2012).

⁶ The traditional Albanian house was isolated, with a courtyard all around it, a portico on the ground floor (*hajati*) and a loggia on the uppermost storey (*çardak*). Open spaces (porticos, loggias and courtyard) were often used for the artisan production of silk and fabrics. With the consolidation of industrial production, this function was progressively abandoned and new housing patterns have become established. The authors wish to thank Ar. Eltjana Shkreli, a native of Shkodër, for her precious suggestions concerning Shkodër’s residential architecture.

⁷ The question of the ownership of the buildings is a complex issue in Albania. Attempts have been made since the Nineties to remedy the expropriations that took place during the Communist regime with a series of laws concerning real estate property, yet without entirely satisfactory results (see chap. II.4).

day home', a type of residence which was already widespread throughout the rest of the continent.

The villas of Razëm belong to the building type known to Idromeno's architectural production as "house with *krevet*", which is assonant with *krevat* (in Albanian, "bed"). The term seems to derive from the jargon of the itinerant master builders of the area of Dibra (in North-East Albania, near the border with Macedonia) and refers to those dwellings that present a stoop with a few steps (which in this case are low in height, comparable to that of a bed), leading up to the front door of a house (Luzati, 2012^b) (Fig. II-5.3). The purpose is to separate the building from the ground for aesthetic reasons, but also for technological ones (protection from rising damp and enhancement of transverse ventilation of the living quarters and therefore also of summer comfort). In Razëm the separation from the ground is emphasised by a recurring element: a base with the same height as the *krevet* which occasionally juts out a few centimetres from the facade.

Some villas have a half hipped roof, a type of roofing that is typical of alpine architecture in Albania, but also in the North of Europe (Muka *et al.*, 2004; Muka, 2007; Shkreli, 2018) (Fig. II-5.4). This typology of roof, when compared to the traditional hip roof, permits the inclusion of a window on the short side of the building for ventilating and illuminating the attic more efficiently. In some cases, they include dormers, an evident contamination with the Mitteleuropean architectural culture with which Razëm was in contact, as mentioned, since the 19th century.

The roof covering is made of clay tiles, rather than of wood shingles (as is typical instead in the Albanian alpine tradition), thus confirming once again the influences of the urban residential model. During the analysis of the roof of one of the villas, some Marseille tiles with the trademark "V. Anastasiadhi Durrës, Prodhim tullash" (Brothers Anastasiadhi Durrës, Producers of Bricks) were found. The reference to the brick factory – which was active in Durrës since the beginning of the Thirties⁸ – provides confirmation both of the period of construction of the building and of the authenticity of the roof.

The complex of the villas of Razëm is therefore evidence of a refined architectural and urban planning operation that managed to combine the most innovative developments of city architecture – in line with the upper-bourgeois nature of the owners – with elements related to the identity of the Alpine building tradition.

Of the eight villas of the complex, only one was built in a later period. According to the owner (it is the only currently inhabited villa), the first two storeys of the building were constructed in the Forties, while the third floor was added during the years of the Communist regime. It is also larger than the others. Although an attempt was made to use the same architectural language that characterises the other villas, it is still evident that it responds to a different design logic.

Analysis of the building system

The walls of the buildings are made of uncoursed rubble stone masonry, except for the corners, which are made of squared off stones, often left exposed. The various walls stand on the base upon which the first floor is built. The facades are plastered and

⁸ It was possible to retrace the existence of the building using the following link: <<https://durrreslajm.al/speciale/durr%C3%ABsi-n%C3%AB-vitet-1930-mbi-15-p%C3%ABrqind-t%C3%AB-bizneseve-t%C3%AB-vendit-foto>>.



Figure II-5.4
Above: A one-storey villa with a half-hipped roof. *Below:* A two-storey villa with a hipped roof.

often feature cornices in relief (often made with plastered bricks) around doors and windows. The lintels are generally in reinforced concrete. In only one case, the bricks that compose the corners, the flat arches, as well as the jambs of windows and doors, are left exposed (Fig. II.5.5).

The floor structure consists of joists that rest on bearers, which in turn support wooden planks that constitute the paving. Sometimes the boarding is covered with decorated grit tiles (perhaps imported from Italy) or with terracotta tiles.



5



6

The load bearing structure of the roofs is in timber. The only roof structure that could be observed presents a queen post truss. Roof covering is in clay roof tiles (usually Marseilles tiles) (Fig. II-5.6); one villa has a roof covering of corrugated asbestos cement sheets.

In the two-storey villas, the staircases were originally internal; in some cases there are also exterior staircases which clearly seem to have been added at a later date.

The *krevet* is made with elements of reinforced concrete, some of which pre-fabricated and others cast-in-place.

Partition walls are mostly in hollow bricks.

Doors and windows are in wood with small metal parts; one of the villas still has Italian made metal roller shutters⁹.

State of conservation

With the exception of the only inhabited villa, the buildings are in a condition of total abandonment. The state of conservation, however, varies: some villas are greatly at risk from a structural point of view, with collapsed parts of the load-bearing walls, the roof and the floors (as in the case of the villa of the Kurti family) (Fig. II-5.7); others instead are in better condition and preserve most of their structural and non-structural parts, although greatly damaged. Damage of the roofs, water infiltration, absence of windows and doors, deterioration of the finishes (plasters and pavings) and invasive weeds are widespread.

Incorrect works carried out throughout the years can also be observed (for example, exterior staircases placed on the rear of some buildings) which have altered the original morphology of the villas and accelerated structural failure processes and decay phenomena (Fig. II-5.8).

Figure II-5.5
A view of a villa with exposed decorative bricks. It should be noted the base, with the same height as the entrance steps, which slightly juts out from the facade.

Figure II-5.6
A detail of a roof cornice with timber corbels.

⁹ It is the company "Costruttore Corsaro Nicola - Bari". The Corsaro company is still active and in the Twenties was exporting to some countries in the Balkans. See <<http://corsaronicola.com/it/azienda/>>.

Critical issues and future prospects

What has been presented above is evidence of the historical, cultural and landscape value of the complex of the villas of Razëm. As pointed out, the first obstacle to overcome is certainly represented by the difficult situation concerning their ownership (Fig. II-5.9).

For the safeguarding of the villas it is necessary to act simultaneously on three levels: (1) urgently implement safety measures for securing load-bearing structures and roofs, (2) determine a specific instrument (Recovery plan) that regulates the transformation processes, and (3) initiate the procedure for the recognition of the complex as a “Cultural Asset” and, in particular, as a “Historical Urban Complex” (Ansambël Historik Urban), in accordance with Law no. 27 of 17.05.2018.

The application of protection measures appears as a priority in light of the provisions of the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan, which envisages for the area of the villas (“A3- Rural Mountain Area” zone) a coefficient of land usage of 20% and a designated use as residential, accommodation and services area (Bashkia Malësi e Madhe, 2017: 55).



Figure II-5.7
The current state of
ruin of the villa that
once belonged to
the Kurti family.



Figure II-5.8
An example of the additions and transformations that occurred over time on the rear facade of a villa.



Figure II-5.9
A sign located in the proximity of the complex of villas that says: "The land is not for sale, there are problems".

Intervention strategies

S2 Planning Strategies

A.1 Drafting of a Recovery Plan for the complex of the historical villas of Razëm

The Action proposes to draft a *Recovery Plan* (Plani i Detajuar Vendor) aimed at the preservation and redevelopment of the complex of historical villas and the use of the built heritage in full respect of its identity-ascribing features.

The *Recovery Plan* may be organised in three separate phases: (1) Preliminary knowledge analysis, (2) Drafting, and (3) Implementation.

PHASE 1: PRELIMINARY KNOWLEDGE ANALYSIS

This phase has three main goals: (1) identify the owners of the buildings and of the open-air spaces, (2) reconstruct a reliable historiographic framework based on documentary research and on the analysis of archival sources (property deeds, original projects, period photographs, reports, etc.) kept by public entities and institutions as well as the analysis of photographic sources kept at the “Marubi” National Photography Museum in Shkodër, and finally (3) carry out a more thorough on-field analysis of the buildings and of the context in which they stand.

Our suggestion is to organise the on-field analysis according to the following steps:

- Environmental overview, paying special attention to the system of pathways, accesses and local vegetation;
- Typological analysis of the buildings in order to identify the particular traits of the architecture of the villas in relation to the coeval architecture of Shkodër;
- Geometrical, photographic and technological survey of the buildings, including the necessary thematic charts for defining the proposals for action;
- Identification of additions and alterations to the original configuration of the buildings;
- Survey of crack patterns;
- Analysis of the general state of conservation of the buildings so as to understand causes and mechanisms of structural failures and decay phenomena.

PHASE 2: DRAFTING OF THE RECOVERY PLAN

The Plan should achieve the objectives detailed below.

RECOVERY OF THE BUILDINGS

- Safety works on the buildings in a critical state of conservation;
- Structural consolidation and removal of any causes of decay;
- Restoration of the buildings so as to preserve and enhance as much as possible their original layout;
- Energy retrofitting and redevelopment of technological systems;
- Replacement of those parts of the buildings that were built with harmful materials (such as the corrugated asbestos cement sheets), in accordance with European provisions and regulations concerning the procedures for the removal and disposal of asbestos and of building materials which present a health hazard.

REUSE WITH THE ORIGINAL FUNCTIONS OR INTRODUCTION OF NEW DESIGNATED USES COMPATIBLE WITH THE IDENTITY OF THE BUILDINGS

With the aim of preserving the idea underlying the original project for the villas, our recommendation is to limit the designated use to residential or tourist accommodation functions (*bujtina*). Only in the case of the villa that belonged to the family of Tinka Kurti we suggest converting it into a Documentation Centre, as described in Action A.3.

LANDSCAPE REGENERATION OF OPEN SPACES

It is advisable to envisage a series of measures aimed at the preservation and care of the open spaces. In particular, our suggestion is to:

- Enhance accessibility and safety of the exterior paths and staircases, envisaging support and fall protection elements where necessary;
- Fix the fences around some of the villas in accordance with homogeneity and low visual and environmental impact criteria;
- Design a lighting system for the open spaces, using devices that are consistent with the architectural context and energy saving lamps;
- Redesign the green areas, including the planting of autochthonous plant species and preservation of the original plant specimens.

PHASE 3: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOVERY PLAN

The *Recovery Plan* should be promoted through public or private initiative. In the case of implementation through private initiative, it would be desirable for the owners of the buildings to obtain support from public entities.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies*A.2 Proposal for establishing heritage protection regulations for the complex of the historical villas of Razëm*

This Action aims at initiating the procedures for the assessment of cultural interest (Verifikimi i Interesit Kulturor) for the entire complex of the historical villas of Razëm (buildings and open-air spaces). This initiative is considered as urgent due to the state of decay in which these buildings are at present, especially in light of the provisions of the Malësi e Madhe General Town Plan that, if applied, would lead to the serious alteration of the environmental context and of the buildings themselves.

According to the recent provisions of Law no. 27 of 17.05.2018 “Për trashëgiminë kulturore dhe muzetë” (About cultural heritage and museums), arts. 57-70 (regarding the architectural heritage) and arts. 249-250 (regarding the landscape value), the complex of the villas could be found to have the necessary requirements for aspiring to recognition as a “Cultural Asset” (Pasuri Kulturore).

In particular, in light of the architectural and urban features of the residential complex, it may be recognised as a “Historical Urban Context” (Ansambël Historik Urban), as defined in accordance with the provisions of art. 5, section 2 and art. 53, section 3, subsection ii, of the said Law as a “structure identified by urban/architectural features, part of the real estate cultural assets, whose elements are linked together and with the surrounding environment by significant spatial and aesthetic relationships”.

S6 Enhancement Strategies*A.3 Proposal for creating the “Tinka Kurti Documentation Centre”*

The villa, which belonged to the family of the famous actress Tinka Kurti, is currently in a state of ruin. The roof, the floors and part of the load-bearing walls have collapsed.

The Action is aimed at the restoration of the building and its conversion into a Documentation Centre focused on the actress herself and on her era^(a). The life of the actress and the history of the villas are expressions of Albanian culture during the 20th century. They are both particularly linked to the years of the Communist regime and it is considered that this initiative could prove to be an attraction for tourists, but also an opportunity for the inhabitants of the region of Shkodër to know and come to terms with their own history. As is well known, Hoxha’s dictatorship modified the anthropological and productive structure of Albania, profoundly altering artistic, artisan and social practices of the country. During the summer, the Centre could organise in the Square of Razëm – in collaboration with the organisers of the Literary Festival of Razëm^(b), the “Marubi” Museum and the local public entities – a festival of 20th century Albanian film and theatre, as well as events concerning the photography, visual arts, rhapsodic tradition and artisan production of that period (see chap. II.2).

Notes

- a) A reference worth mentioning is the Kadare House Studio (Kadare Shtëpia Studio), located in the centre of Tirana. See Baxhaku (2019).
- b) The Literary Festival of Razëm (Ditët Letrare të Razmës) has been organised since 2015 by the Instituti Europian Pashko in collaboration with the Universiteti Europian i Tiranës. The event takes place during the last weekend of May. The purpose of the activity is the promotion of Albanian literature through prizes awarded to the best writers.

PART III
THE COASTAL VILLAGE OF ZVĚRNEC



Figure III-0.1 – Zvërnec on the map of Albania.

General overview

VILLAGES	ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES	MUNICIPALITY	REGION
Zvërnec	Qendër Vlorë	Vlorë	Vlorë	Vlorë

The village of Zvërnec is located in the southern part of the Lagoon of Nartë, on a promontory over a small gulf (Gjiri i vogël) which looks like a miniature of the ‘great’ Gulf of Vlorë (Gjiri i Vlorës) (Figs. III-0.1 and III-0.2). Vlorë, which lies in a south-easterly direction, is the only city with which the village is directly linked by land.

Zvërnec consists of two different quarters: the oldest part of the settlement located on the hill and the more recent quarter of the Vlachs¹, which occupies the part of the village next to the shore.

The inhabitants of both quarters speak Albanian and Greek and have dual citizenship (the Vlachs also speak a dialect that is related to Romanian).

The village gave its name to the Island of Zvërnec, made famous by the presence of the Byzantine Church of the Dormition of Mary (category I Cultural Monument), which every year attracts many faithful and tourists alike, both Albanian and foreign. The church was part of an old monastic complex, of which only a few buildings remain today.

In addition to the church, there is another category I Cultural Monument in the area of Zvërnec: the fortification surrounding a settlement from the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., known as *Kështjella e Treportit* (Castle of Treporti). Fragments of the ancient walls are preserved today on the hill of Treporti and under the sea along the south-west coast of the village.

¹ See chap. III.2.



Figure III-0.2
The evocative
landscape of the
Lagoon of Nartë.

Being part of the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë is undoubtedly an added value for Zvërnec. Within this protected area – one of the richest habitats in terms of biodiversity of the whole of Albania – there are five sites classified as Natural Monuments, including the Island of Zvërnec (Fig. III-0.3).

Also worth mentioning for their peculiarity are some military structures scattered throughout the area. Among these, the most significant are the four monumental bunkers located on the plain of Zhukë, which have a high tourism potential not only due to their historical value, but also and especially for the quality of the landscape in which they are located.

Zvërnec has a *kryeplak* (village headman) who serves as an intermediary between the inhabitants and public institutions.

The inhabitants of the village are Orthodox Christians and every year, on August 15th, they celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of Mary in the church on the island.

In 2018 the village had 1,332 registered residents; of these, 1,101 have emigrated abroad (mostly to Greece) and 24 have emigrated to Vlorë or Tirana. Emigrants thus are approximately 85% of the total population, and the average age of the people effectively living in the village (around 207 people) is around 62 years². The migrant families return to the village almost exclusively during the summer months, while some of the domestic migrants also return for the Orthodox Easter.

The main driver of tourism development consists in beach and seaside activities, which have seen a constant growth in recent years, attracting mostly families in search of places that are more isolated and less crowded than the traditional destinations on the Southern Albanian coast. The houses used as accommodation are managed directly by their owners (usually migrants who return to the village in summer).

² These data were provided by the Civil Registry Office in Nartë.

**MAP KEY****Natural Monuments**

1. Island of Zvërnec
2. Lagoon of Limopua
3. Dunes of Nartë
4. Plane tree of Mifol
5. Vineyards of Mifol

Category I Cultural Monuments

6. Church of the Dormition of Mary
7. Castle of Treporti

Other Sites

8. Lagoon of Nartë

9. Salt pans

10. Beaches of Zvërnec
11. Salt Lake of Godulla
12. Lake of Kallenga
13. Vjosa Delta
14. Forest of Soda
15. Treporti cape
16. Chapel of Shën Thanas
17. Chapel of Holy Trinity
18. Bunkers of Zhukë
19. Petrolifera Italo-Albanese plant
20. Water purification plant of Vlorë

Figure III-0.3
The Natural
and Cultural
Monuments and
other significant
sites around
Zvërnec.

During the rest of the year, Zvërnec is left in the custody of the elderly members of the community, who eagerly look forward to seeing their children and grandchildren. Depopulation and emigration are here – perhaps more than in the other villages analysed in this book – a social wound that does not heal and also constitute factors that every local development strategic proposals must inevitably take into account. These proposals must necessarily rely on the beauty and variety of the landscape, which, however, still bears the marks of the industrial past of the area, and is under risk of new menaces that endanger its already fragile balance.

Food heritage

Within the region of Labëria, Zvërnec has a distinct culinary tradition¹. This is due to the peculiarity of the lagoon environment, to the fishing tradition, and to the presence of a population of Greek descent that has settled in the quarter on the hill since remote times (see chap. III.4).

The typical products of the lagoon and the culinary tradition

Zvërnec is a fishing village that through time has developed a close link to the lagoon, a unique ecosystem including eels, crabs, bass, bream and four different types of mullet. The latter, due to their low cost, are the most widely eaten fish in the area (MedWetCoast, 2004).

The Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi had already mentioned this abundance of fish, by highlighting the presence of carps, mackerel, chubs, mullets and bass, as well as of fish roe (cit. in Dankoff & Elsie, 2000).

Fishing is mostly based on traditional artisan methods and ancient tools (see chap. III.2). Things have changed over the past years however, as a result of off-season fishing and the use of illegal fishing methods that alter the ecologic balance of the lagoon, such as poisoning, use of dynamite, trawling and night-fishing with torch lights (Papayannis, 2008)². Fishing, in addition to providing subsistence for the families of the fishermen, is also a source of income for the inhabitants of the lagoon, since part of the catch is destined to the local market.

¹ The inhabitants of Labëria (*Lab*) were originally shepherds. This is reflected in a culinary culture based on meat and dairy products, olive oil, wine and citrus fruits, which is only partially found in the Nartë Lagoon.

² See <<https://tegraf.al/opinion-2/kush-po-e-shkaterron-faunen-e-lagunes-se-nartes/>>.

Fish is the main food source for the inhabitants of Zvërnec and the basis of a simple and not particularly varied culinary tradition (Fig. III-1.1). One of the reasons is that the few recipes originated spontaneously, with the few ingredients available to the fishermen on their return to the shore.

A historical fishermen's dish is boiled crab (*gaforre e zier në kusi*)³, cooked on a high flame with water and salt and usually eaten without seasoning or with lemon and olive oil. The crab (*carcinus aestuarii*), which is not very abundant, has some commercial value but is mostly used for family consumption.

The most representative dish of Zvërnec is surely stewed mullet (*tavë qefulli*). It is prepared using an old recipe that includes aromatic herbs typical of the area (such as dill), olive oil, onions and baby onions, pepper and fresh red bell peppers. These ingredients are fried together and then mixed with the shredded mullet and the water. The dish is then cooked in the oven for approximately 30 minutes⁴.

Eels are also stewed and cooked in the oven (*tavë ngjale*) following the same recipe as for the mullet (only replacing the fresh bell peppers with a bell pepper paste), or else grilled (*ngjala në hell*)⁵. Another typical dish of the lagoon is raw or fried roe (*vezë peshku*). It was once the everyday fare of fishermen and their families, yet today it is a sought-after and expensive product⁶.

The Lagoon of Nartë also has an old tradition of salt production. The use and preparation of salted fish is linked to the presence of the salt pans. The quality of the salted fish was renowned along the whole of the Adriatic coast (see Ducellier 1981). Unfortunately, this ancient technique of fish preservation has been entirely lost in Zvërnec.



Figure III-1.1
Fish varieties of the
Lagoon of Nartë.
[Courtesy: Celim
Albania]

³ Interview in Zvërnec on 18.07.2019.

⁴ Interview in Zvërnec on 20.07.2019.

⁵ The village elders relate that in accordance with tradition, in addition to preparing their own trousseau, maidens were expected to learn how to cook eels.

⁶ Interview in Zvërnec on 20.07.2019.

Due to the nature of the soil, which has a high salt content, agro-food production is limited and not exceptionally varied, and is therefore relatively marginal in terms of the local economy (MedWet-Coast, 2004).

Olive trees of the esteemed variety known as *kalinjot*⁷ (some of which are centuries-old) are cultivated in Zvërnec (Fig. III-1.2). Thanks to their high lipid content, the olives are mostly used for the production of high-quality natural olive oil (NTA, 2017), mainly for domestic consumption and in small amounts for local trading.

Salads are widespread in the local culinary culture, as well as sheep and goat milk cheese produced by the Vlachs shepherds, enough for satisfying the needs of the local families and restaurants.

Traditional dishes use meat to a limited extent. A typical recipe is the *kavërma*, roasted lamb in a cream of flour and seasoned with onions, baby onions, parsley, oil and pepper⁸.

No autochthonous pastry-making tradition was identified, but rather, as expected, an assortment of products of Greek origin. Among the typical sweets and pastries, prepared for family or religious feasts, the following are worth mentioning: (1) *yslmer*, which comes from the region of Myzeqe and is prepared with several layers of *phyllo* dough, (2) *bugaçe* bread⁹, a variation of a typical Greek recipe, and, finally, (3) the *buka e Krishtlindjeve*, (in dialect, *kllore*) and the *buka e Pashkëve*, both based on a combination of flour, egg, milk, sugar and butter.

In Nartë, and in the few vineyards on the hills of Panaja, a good quality of wine is produced from a variety of local grape (*vlosh*)¹⁰. This grape is cultivated in soils with a low salt content, which give the *vlosh* wine a particular taste¹¹. In order to safeguard this small yet esteemed production of wine in the lagoon area and to promote it, the “Feast of wine”, accompanied by typical culinary products and folk music, is held in Nartë on the last Saturday in September.



Figure III-1.2 – Centuries-old olive trees on the top of the hill where the older quarter of Zvërnec is situated.

⁷ The *kalinjot* olive-tree is an autochthonous species, which lives over a hundred years and has been widespread in this region since antiquity (from Vlorë to the coasts of Himare and Borsh).

⁸ Interview in Zvërnec on 18.07.2019.

⁹ The *bugaçe* of Zvërnec is traditionally prepared for marriages. During the nuptial rite, the bride and groom eat it with some honey as an auspicious symbol and for fertility. Interview in Zvërnec on 20.01.2020.

¹⁰ The wine from this area was mentioned by Çelebi, who speaks of a type of wine called *reyhania* (cit. in Dankoff & Elsie, 2000).

¹¹ The agronomist Nardi Gura has undertaken an initiative for recovering historical vineyards and the type of *vlosh* grape.

Critical issues and future prospects

The lagoon fish-based culinary tradition is the main feature of the local diet. It should be promoted not as a set of 'typical products', since there is no great variety of products in the area, but rather as an engine of tourism development which invests in the skills that could thrive thanks to the recovery of the traditional knowledge, guarded particularly by the elderly, the fishermen and the wine-makers. In Zvërnec there are already some typical restaurants, some of which are well-known even outside the lagoon area, where the traditional fish-based cuisine can be tasted (see NTA, 2017: 33).

The food heritage is unfortunately endangered by the high levels of pollution (see chap. III.3). According to studies carried out by EDEN in 2012, many species of fish from the lagoon have levels of mercury that are above the European Union safety threshold (EDEN, CRCDD, 2018). This critical situation requires an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the water, air and soil pollution in the proximity of contaminated sites.

Moreover, it is urgent to address the problems related to pollution, inherited from the industrial past of the area and from a number of debatable choices, through environment-friendly policies and efficient environmental recovery actions (see chap. III.3). These actions are preparatory for any hypothesis of enhancement of the raw materials, of the wine and food typical products, as well as of the local catering sector.

Intervention strategies

S1 Educational and Training Strategies

A.1 Drafting an educational project concerning the lagoon fish

This Action aims at organising an educational project focusing on the lagoon fish and on the preparation of the traditional fish-based dishes at the school of Nartë and in the schools of the surrounding villages. The project could include lessons about the various species of fish of the Nartë Lagoon and their nutritional properties, as well as workshops on the methods and techniques for preparing the various typical dishes, led by fishermen, local restaurant chefs and village elders (see A.1, chap. III.3).

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.2 Creating a Digital Inventory of Traditional Recipes and Memories of Local Culinary Culture

See A.3, chap. I.1.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development together with the Vlorë Regional Government could promote this Action. It could be implemented locally by the Municipality of Vlorë with the participation of NGOs active in the area, food science experts, anthropologists and ethnologists.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.3 Promoting forms of cooperation among the local food and wine producers

The typical products of the region are olives, olive oil, and *vlosh* wine. These are all of good quality but are produced in limited amounts and mostly for family consumption.

Forms of cooperation between farmers (for example, community enterprises) could be useful for promoting these products.

In addition to consolidating social cohesion, these initiatives should aim at achieving two main goals:

(1) to initiate procedures for the recognition as “typical products” of the said foods (see A.5, chap. I.1), and (2) to develop their production and marketing, focusing especially on the restaurants in the area.

A.4 Transmitting culinary knowledge and experience through experiential tourism

The Action aims at disseminating the features of the lagoon area, the everyday life of the fishermen, the fishing tradition and the local fish-based culinary culture.

From this perspective, an initiative based on the concept of “fish and eat” (in Albanian *peshku n’det e tigani n’zjarr*) could be devised. This initiative should ‘directly’ involve the tourist who could participate in the fishing ritual, in the preparation and cooking of the fish (directly on site or in the homes of the fishermen), and would finally enjoy the finished product in accordance with the ancient culinary traditions. This would provide a small source of income for the families of the fishermen who use traditional fishing techniques that respect the lagoon ecosystem.

A.5 Enhancing the lagoon culinary heritage in Zvërnec

The Action aims at promoting the area of the lagoon through the organisation of the *Street food in the Lagoon*^(a) culinary event. It could take place along the streets of Zvërnec during the summer, when there is a larger presence of tourists and many migrants return to the village.

This event could include a series of activities:

- Show cooking experiences, during which street chefs reinterpret traditional recipes from the lagoon area using local products;
- Tasting of typical fish-based dishes from the lagoon area;
- Tasting and purchasing local dairy products, typical sweets and *vlosh* wine;
- Cookery book launches and debates on the topic of food as a health choice and a factor in the prevention of many ailments.

In order to promote other peculiarities of the area, a series of side initiatives could be carried out during the event:

- Folk dances and concerts of traditional music;
 - Day trips on the lagoon on the fishermen’s boats;
 - Exhibitions involving the production techniques of artisan fishing tools (see chap. III.1).
-

Notes

- a) See the “Pesce in collina” project, which takes place in Magliano (Tuscany) (<<https://www.grossetonotizie.com/progetto-pesce-in-collina-magliano/>>) and the “Festa del Pescatore” held in Santa Maria la Scala, near Acireale (Sicily) (<<http://www.festadelpescatore.it/index.php>>).

Traditions, social practices and local craftsmanship

Due to its location in a lagoon environment, the village of Zvërnec is different from the other coastal villages in the South of Albania. The presence of the lagoon is a significant indicator, not only from a geographic and environmental perspective, but also in cultural terms. Thus, the focus of this chapter is Zvërnec within the cultural traditions of the Lagoon of Nartë. Given the lack of scientific literature, in order to address some topics it was necessary to expand the reference context (from a geographical and cultural point of view), with all the risks and uncertainties that this operation entails.

Traditions and cultural heritage

The high rate of depopulation that characterises the village of Zvërnec inevitably affects the processes of transmission of traditions and social practices. The permanent population of Zvërnec consists mostly of elderly people, while migrant families return to the village only during the summer months. This discontinuity and fragmentary nature of the relationship between generations inevitably endangers the safeguarding of the collective memory.

Although the inhabitants of the two quarters of the village, have different ethnic roots (see General Overview)¹, they share a strong common link with Greece. They possess dual citizenship, and those who live on the hill even consider themselves to be a Greek minority². This is no trifling matter considering the distance of the village

¹ For a long time the Vlachs represented an extraneous element for the native population. Only recently have the inhabitants of both quarters begun to interact at the community level and to establish family links between them.

² This status is not recognised by the Albanian State.

from the border. On the other hand, reluctance to fully identify with the ‘host’ culture³, seems to have always characterised ethnic minorities in Albania, as can be seen from the words of Ibrahim Manzour, a French officer in the service of Ali Pasha Tepelena between 1814-1817: “There are several villages in Albania that are inhabited by foreigners (...). Each of these villages is inhabited by only one ethnic group (...). Each of these colonies conserves its own language and even retains something of its native costumes and primitive customs. The men in these villages normally learn Albanian because they have contacts and need it for trade. But the women only speak their mother tongue according to the country from which the colony arrived”⁴.

Traditional festivities

The part of social life in which traditions are kept most alive is certainly religion. All the inhabitants of the village are Orthodox Christians and the church on the island is for them an undisputed point of reference. On August 15, when the Feast of the Dormition of Mary is celebrated, the faithful flock to the church on the island, not only from the surroundings, but also from other towns in the country. On the night preceding the feast, the inhabitants of the hill quarter descend in a procession toward the church (Figs. III-2.1 and III-2.2).

The island still maintains a halo of sacredness, which is felt in the testimonies of the villagers. During the years of state atheism, when access to the island was forbidden, the inhabitants would gather to pray in silence on the threshing floor (*lëma*) of the hill quarter, located in a privileged spot facing the island, so as to maintain, at least visually, the spiritual bond with their church⁵.

Also during the rituals related to Easter (which here coincides with the beginning of the Carnival⁶) there was a large participation. Young people, adults and elderly alike would take part in a series of ceremonies where the folkloric and religious dimensions are strictly bound, as is shown in the carnival masks, the traditional dishes or the role games. Zvërnec elders believe that the seed of the feasts is still alive among the younger generations, despite their physical distance from the village. In the nearby village of Nartë the tradition of Carnival is still experienced through a strong sense of community and has even become a tourist attraction (Papayannis, 2008).

Local craftsmanship

Zvërnec is mentioned since the 17th century in the writings of foreign travellers. A significant testimony arrives from Evliya Çelebi, who in 1670 undertook a journey across the South of Albania. He observed that the main activities in the village were the production of salt and fishing. It seems that the inhabitants of Zvërnec used to pay a tribute to the Sublime Porte consisting of large amounts of salt produced there, instead of undergoing the usual taxation system. The salt was then exported to the whole of Europe (cit. in Dankoff & Elsie, 2000).

³ See Chapter III.4

⁴ This quote is taken from the English translation by Robert Elsie of the travel diary that Manzour kept during his stay in Albania and Greece. See: <http://www.albanianhistory.net/1827_Manzour/index.html>.

⁵ From a testimony gathered in Zvërnec on July 20, 2019.

⁶ In the area of Nartë the Carnival starts on the Easter Sunday and goes on for two more days.



Figure III-2.1
Pilgrims
celebrating the
Feast of the
Dormition of Mary
on the night of 14th
August. [Courtesy:
CELIM, Albania]



Figure III-2.2
Island of Zvërnec
as a stage for
community
events. [Courtesy:
CELIM, Albania]

Very few people today in the Lagoon of Nartë maintain the artisan knowledge of the past. In Zvërnec, in particular, with the exception of food products (oil, *vlosh* wine, and *raki*), there are no active artisans.

Some echoes of the past remain in the traditional clothing of the lagoon area. The local scholar Sejmen Gjokoli underlines the uniqueness of the female garments from Nartë and the quality of linen and silk fabrics with which they were produced⁷. These fabrics were widespread in all social classes since silkworms were commonly cultivated in the courtyards of the houses. The cultivation of the silkworm and the processing of silk were carried out by women and were a significant part of the family economy. This activity reached its greatest development during the 18th and 19th centuries, and

⁷ See <<https://erinadacineews.wordpress.com/2013/07/09/veshjet-popullore-vlonjate-resurs-per-zhvillimin-e-turizmit-kulturor/>>.

continued to be practiced until the Forties of the 20th century in all villages of the Albanian Plain (Onuzi, 1984), including the Vjosa Delta's Plain. In fact, Venetian commercial records indicate that great quantities of manufactured silk and silkworms came precisely from the port of Vlorë (Ducellier, 1981).

Artifacts and work tools

Regarding everyday objects and work tools, since specific studies concerning the lagoon area are not known, it will be necessary to extend the attention to wider contexts: in the case of the former the whole region of Labëria (to which the Lagoon of Nartë belongs) will be considered; concerning the latter the wider Albanian context will be observed.

According to Dojaka (2017), before the establishment of the Communist regime, local artisans produced approximately two-thirds of domestic objects. Ceramic objects, widespread in the region of the lagoon⁸, were partly produced in the area and partly (especially larger ones) imported from Greece or else bought at the market of Vlorë. Among these it is worth mentioning the *saç prej dheu* (a sort of pot for the oven), the *shtama* (amphorae and vases, known in Nartë as *kotruve*) and the *kapasa* (jars) for preserving oil and dairy products.

Among the objects of everyday use, in addition to the most common ones also found throughout the region, Dojaka (2017) mentions the barrels and containers for stocking and transporting food products. They were made in oak, maple and larch and reinforced with iron hoops.

Typical elements from this area were the wood ovens inside the dwellings, one of which was found in the only traditional house in Zvërnec that is still inhabited. The wood ovens were built by the inhabitants themselves using cheap materials (small branches and mud), or else using bricks, depending on the needs and economic resources of the family (Dojaka, 2017).

The inhabitants generally scorned the work of the smith, and metal tools were bought from travelling craftsmen (*jevgjit*).

Regarding work tools, in the context of the lagoon those used for fishing are worth special attention⁹.

Among the most ancient techniques widely used by Albanian fishermen in the area of the lagoon, fishing with rods (*peshkimi me shkop*) and harpoons (*fuzhna*) are among the best known. Another tool was the *kosh e kovna*, a spherical or oval cage with an opening toward the inside, made by the fishermen themselves with willow branches. Also widely used were the nets, made (perhaps by women) from linen thread and occasionally fitted out with a wooden structure with plumb bobs (Fig. III-2.3).

Before the Nineties, approximately 200 fishermen worked in the area of the lagoon¹⁰. Today, instead, the few inhabitants who go fishing, do it for their own personal consumption or to obtain a small additional income. The most widely used methods for fishing in the lagoon today are the gillnetting and the weir (*njica*), a very ancient

⁸ See photographic and documentary sources kept at the Central State Film Archive (Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror i Filmit -AQSHF) of Tirana.

⁹ Since there are no specific studies concerning the Lagoon of Nartë, the information has been derived from ethnographic studies regarding the delta of the Buna (and the surrounding marshes) and the lake of Shkodër. The main sources are: Selhani & Cani (1985) and Dojaka (2017).

¹⁰ See <<https://www.oranews.tv/article/peshkimi-i-paligjshem-ankohen-peshkataret-e-vlores-rrezikohet-zhdukja-e-rasatit>>.



Figure III-2.3
Traditional fishing
in the Lagoon of
Nartë by using the
kosh e kovna.

tool which uses the continuous flow of the incoming and outgoing tides to capture the fishes, which by reproductive instinct migrate in the direction of the sea (Selhani & Cani, 1985) (Fig. III-2.4).

Another artisan activity linked to the life in the lagoon involved the construction of rafts and boats. The inhabitants of the village recall how during the winter, communication between Nartë and Zvërnec was possible only through the use of small boats since the land routes, which were used during the summer, became impracticable. In the past, there were probably shipwrights in Nartë who built and repaired boats, but it cannot be excluded that many rafts and canoes were built by the fishermen themselves. During the surveys undertaken, no active craftsmen were found in this field.

For the extraction of salt, simple wooden tools, which were very common in the areas along the Adriatic coast, were used. A photograph taken in 1935, shows the presence of wheelbarrows for transporting salt as well as of wooden rakes for gathering it. The workers also wore wide wooden clogs to avoid sinking into the salt (Fig. III-2.5).

Traditional building

A very few traditional buildings have survived in the area of Nartë Lagoon. The information available on the materials and techniques used in traditional building is very scarce. It can be hypothesised that due to its geographical proximity, itinerant and seasonal master builders (*mjeshtër shëtitës stinorë*) from Korça were active in the area (see Muka, 2007).

In addition to these 'external' builders - who very likely directed the work - the participation in building activities of local artisans (stone cutters and carpenters) is however plausible (Fig. III-2.6).

Critical aspects and future prospects

The lack of ethnographic studies on the Lagoon of Nartë certainly affects its already fragile socio-anthropological identity. In order to recover local traditions, scientific research is therefore called to provide its contribution.

In the specific sphere of the local crafts, the lack of artisans who have inherited the knowledge of the past, suggests a 'reinvention' of the local tradition rather than a focused 'enhancement' action (see chap. II.2). A contribution in this direction could come

not only from Albanian architecture, design and social sciences faculties, but also from local people who have emigrated abroad. The craft skills they have acquired could now be transmitted to the inhabitants of the lagoon through specific educational and training programmes. The village elders could be engaged in these activities. They could provide support for the process of investigation and research regarding traditional objects, especially as far as the reconstruction of their history is concerned. It would be important to recover the historical knowledge, both for fuelling specific ethnographic research projects and for enhancing possible exhibitions dedicated to the customs and traditions of the lagoon area (see A.12, chap. II.1).

The expected result of these educational and training activities consists in the creation of small artisan enterprises engaged in the production of building components, of furniture for domestic use or for the beach establishments of the area, as well as work tools (for example those used for fishing in the lagoon).

In this way, the artisan sector could contribute not only to the creation of job opportunities, but also to the safeguarding and transmission of the historical identity of the lagoon area.



Figure III-2.4
Two traditional
fishing methods
in the Lagoon
of Nartë. Above:
The gillnetting.
Below: The weir
(*njica*). [Courtesy:
CELIM, Albania]



Figure III-2.5
The salt pans of
Nartë in a period
picture (1935). [©
MARKA Photo
Agency]

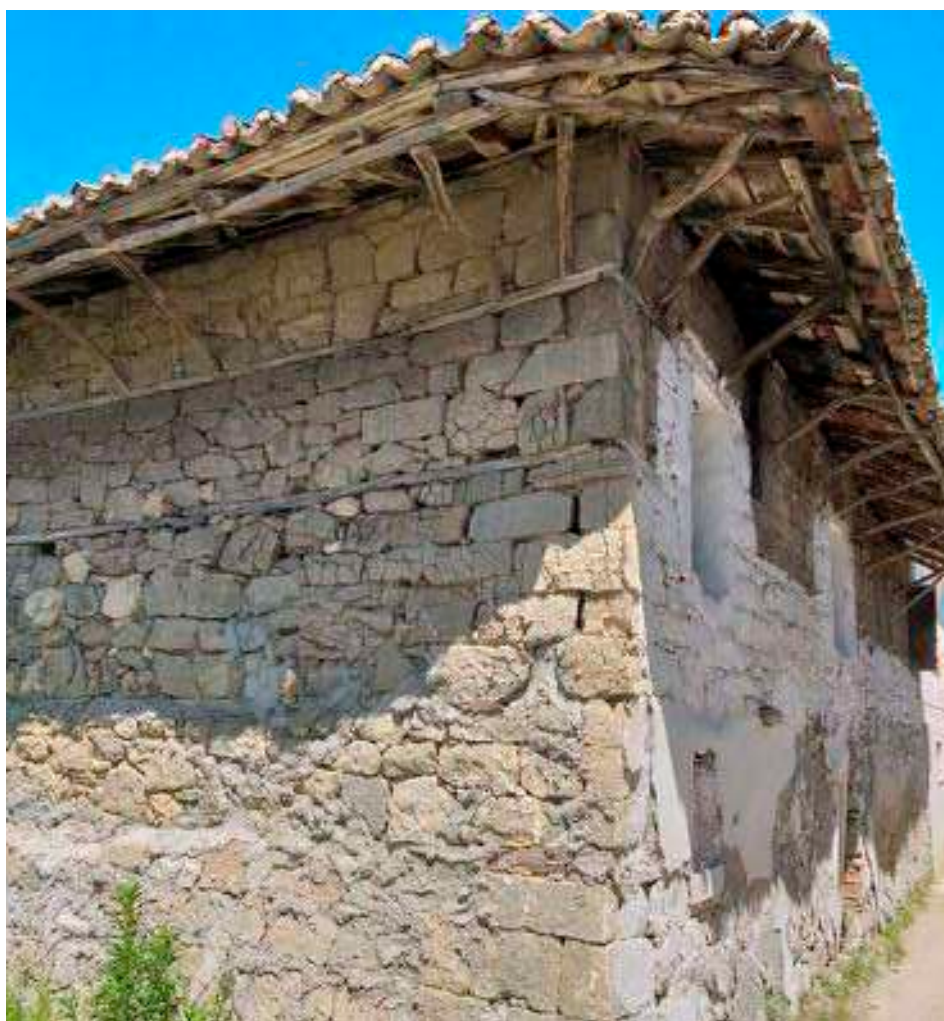


Figure III-2.6
An interesting
roof cornice with
support struts
made of nailed
branches in a
traditional building
in Nartë.

Intervention strategies

S1 Educational and training strategies

A.1 Promoting educational projects aimed at the creation of new skills and job opportunities in the craftsmanship sector

See A.1, chap. I.2.

In the specific case of the area of the Lagoon of Nartë, special attention could be devoted to the furnishing of beach establishments and to the tools connected to fishing activities in the lagoon.

A.2 Promoting educational and training projects related to fishing activities in the lagoon

Fishing in the lagoon is increasingly less practised. Today in Zvërnec, for example, there are fewer than ten active fishermen.

A possible way for recovering the fishing tradition could be the inclusion of extra-curricular activities in the school programmes, involving education and training related to fishing. Through field experiences, the students would have the opportunity to learn from the fishermen the tricks of the trade, concerning both traditional tools and techniques.

This Action could be carried out at the school in Nartë and in the schools of the other villages in the lagoon area; it could be included in the educational project for the recovery of the fish-based culinary tradition described in Action A.1, chap. III.1.

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.3 Favouring the study of traditions and social practices in the area of the lagoon

There are no known specifically historical and socio-economic studies concerning the Lagoon of Nartë. It would be advisable to investigate especially the peculiar features of the villages belonging to the lagoon area in relation to the context of the southern coast of Albania.

This Action requires the contribution of the village elders (so as to reconstruct the historical memory of the place together with craft techniques for creating everyday objects and furniture, as well as traditional work tools), and the starting of research projects that involve the Albanian faculty of History and Philology and Social Sciences, in addition to the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and the Study of Art (Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studim të Artit – IAKSA).

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.4 Fostering the creation of a new craft business

See A.5, chap. I.2.

In the specific case of the Lagoon of Nartë, special attention could be devoted to supporting new artisan enterprises involved in the production of furniture for the beach establishments in the area and of tools connected to fishing activities in the lagoon.

A.5 Promoting the area through local feasts and festivals

The Action is aimed at organising a *Feast of Biodiversity* in Zvërnec, on the occasion of the *World Biodiversity Day*. This event, established by the General Assembly of the United Nations through the 1992 Nairobi Convention, is celebrated every year on May 22nd in many places throughout the world^(a).

Guided visits could be organised for discovering the beauty and diversity of the landscape, in combination with activities aimed at tasting the local products^(b).

The event could provide an important opportunity for Zvërnec and for the villages located on the lagoon, to promote the natural habitats of the Vjosë-Nartë Protected Landscape. Indeed, it would be the first area in Albania to celebrate the *World Biodiversity Day*.

The *Feast of Biodiversity* could take place on the Island of Zvërnec. Following the example of the Carnival of Nartë, its inclusion in the *National Calendar of Local Feasts* could be proposed^(c).

S7 Management Strategies

A.6 Establishing forms of support for artisan enterprises

See A.9, chap. I.2.

NGOs active in the area of Vlorë could profitably contribute to implementing this Action.

Notes

- a) See <<https://www.nutritrento.it/content/view/full/8400>>.
- b) This event could be advertised through the websites of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment and the Agjencia Kombëtare e Bregdetit, an entity operating at the national level with the aim of promoting the tourist potential of the Albanian coast. At the local scale, instead, dissemination could take place through the information channels of the Municipality of Vlorë and of the NGOs active in the area in the field of environmental safeguarding and enhancement.
- c) See <<http://www.mjedisi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Kalendari-2019.pdf>>.

Landscape

The area of Zvërnec belongs to the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë, established in 2004 by the Council of Ministers. It has been classified as a category V Protected Area (Protected Landscape/Seascape) by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (see INCA, 2018) and has been included in the candidate sites list of the Council of Europe's Emerald Network.

Five Natural Monuments are included in the Protected Landscape: (1) the *Rrapi i Mifolit* (Plane tree of Mifol), (2) the *Vidhat e Mifolit* (Elms of Mifol), (3) the *Laguna Limopua* (Lagoon of Limopua), (4) the *Dunat e Nartës* (Dunes of Nartë), and (5) the *Ishulli i Zvërnecit* (Island of Zvërnec).

Within this area is the Lagoon of Nartë, which meets the criteria of the Convention of Ramsar as far as the total number of wintering aquatic birds is concerned. In fact, this area is home to more than 1% of the bird population in the region of Vlorë, for a total of over 34,000 specimens (Kashta *et al.*, 2010). For this reason, it was declared an "Important Bird and Biodiversity Area" by BirdLife International and proposed for obtaining the European Union "Natura 2000" status (Mladenov *et al.*, 2017).

There are two islands in the lagoon: the largest is the above-mentioned Island of Zvërnec, on which stands the Byzantine Church of the Dormition of Mary that dates back to the 13th century (see chap. III.5). To the south-east of the village, on a strip of land surrounded on all sides by the lagoon is a place of worship very dear to the villagers: the Chapel of Saint Athanasius.

The protected landscape occupies a total area of 19,738 hectares (68% of which belong to the State) and extends into the municipalities of Novoselë and Qendër Vlorë where a total of 24,000 people live overall. Its western border is Adriatic Sea and its coast is characterised by an alternation of sandy beaches and cliffs. The altitude varies between 0 and 246 metres above sea level (MedWetCoast, 2004).

The protected landscape includes a vast variety of habitats which constitute one of the most significant assets in terms of biodiversity at a national level: (1) the Mediterranean scrub in the hilly areas, (2) the alluvial forests of the Vjosa River, (3) the freshwater wetlands of Zvërnec, (4) the sandy dunes of Pishë Poro, (5) the hills of Panajasa, (6) the coastal lagoons of Nartë and Kallengë, (7) the salt pans of Nartë and, finally, (8) the agricultural lands of Akërne.

Although the natural landscape dominates, the protected area coexists in a precarious balance with the industrial sites (both active and dismantled) and with a considerable abandoned military heritage.

The protected landscape includes a dense and not entirely surveyed trail network that develops across captivating places and natural scenic viewpoints of undisputed interest and serves at the same time as a link between various habitats. Once redeveloped, this trail network could become a pivotal component of tourism development, enhancing the accessibility and usability of the territory in accordance with the principles of soft mobility.

The focus of the following description is the landscape of Zvërnec's area and of Nartë's Lagoon, due to their contiguity and belonging to the same ecosystem. However, some references to the surrounding areas will be made.

The landscape of the lagoon

The Lagoon of Nartë is internationally known for its biodiversity, and is the second largest in Albania (approximately 42 km², with an average depth of 1.20 m). Like any other lagoon, the water regime depends on the tides and the waves that raise or lower the level of the water by 15-25 cm. The salinity of the water varies between 36 ‰ in winter to 78 ‰ in summer (Mladenov *et al.*, 2018).

The Lagoon of Nartë is a unique habitat in Albania for its avifauna. The most characteristic bird species are *Pelicanus crispus* and *Phoenicopterus ruber roseus*. Other important species are *Actitis hypoleucos*, *Falco tinunculus*, *Oenanthe oenanthe*, *Charadrius alexandrinus*, and *Glareola pratincol* (UNDP, 2018) (Fig. III-3.1).

The lagoon is separated from the sea by a strip of land known as "Pishë Poro", a habitat composed of sandy dunes and pine groves, which maintained the status of Natural Reserve until 2004. These are the only remaining dunes on the Albanian coast; some of them reach a height of 6-8 metres. The habitat of the dunes is colonised by psam-



Figure III-3.1
The *pelicanus*
crispus: one of the
most representative
bird species of the
Lagoon of Nartë.



Figure III-3.2
A view of the Dunes
of Pishë Poro.

mophyte, hygrophyte and halophyte vegetation which includes species such as *cakile maritima*, *xanthium strumarium subsp. italicum*, *salsola kali* together with other typical species such as *ammophila arenaria subsp arundinaceae*, *elymus farctus*, *echinophora spinosa*, etc. (Kashta *et al.*, 2010) (Fig. III-3.2).

Parallel to the dunes runs a pine grove that extends over approximately 1,200 hectares. The pines were planted between 1980 and 1990 in order to oppose erosion. There are various species, among which *pinus maritima*, *pinus pinea* and *pinus pinaster*. These trees coexist with brush vegetation of the type *quercetea ilicis* (*pistacia lentiscus*, *erica manipuliflora*, *myrtus communis*, etc.) which cover about 40-50% of the total area.

The part of the pine grove located near the old riverbed of the Vjosa has been set on fire on several occasions. The last fire dates back to 2016. Illegal fires and deforesting, often caused by shepherds in order to obtain grazing lands, are a recurring phenomenon also in the Panajasë hills, which are known for their olive groves.

The lagoon borders to the north with the salt pans, which cover a total area of approximately 14 km². There is no certain information concerning the origin of the salt pans, yet their existence since at least the 17th century is proven thanks to the testimony of the renowned Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi who visited Southern Albania in 1670. Çelebi speaks highly of the quality of the salt extracted in the bay of Vlorë and notes the existence of commercial sea-routes to the rest of Europe (cit. in Dankoff & Elsie, 2000). In an Italian Military Geographical Institute (IGM) map (1939), the historical salt pans are shown next to the railway, near the village of Nartë. With the industrial development of Vlorë, they were abandoned and in 1958, the current production area to the north of the lagoon was established in a place called Skrofotinë. The area of the salt pans consists of shallow stagnant water surfaces, small dykes and islands that show clear signs of erosion caused by the wind and by storms. The erosion is causing economic issues (since it has an effect on the production of salt), and is also damaging the breeding areas of numerous endangered species of birds.

Two artificial canals (often blocked by sediments) link the lagoon to the sea. The canals supply seawater to the lagoon, and often also to the salt pans through a complex hydraulic system.

The salt pans use the water of the lagoon consuming every year approximately 15% of its volume. When the fresh water level of the lagoon is very low due to excessive usage, the phenomenon of eutrophication occurs (MedWetCoast, 2004). The resulting increase of plant species such as *phragmites communis*, *typha angustifolia* and *latifolia phyllirea* (the latter constitutes a serious threat to migratory birds) produce great damage to the biota. The southern part of the lagoon, on the other hand, has preserved its original fresh water composition.

Zvërnec and its island

The village of Zvërnec stands on a promontory surrounded to the north-east by the waters of the Lagoon of Nartë and to the south-west by the Adriatic Sea. The area is characterised by small plains separated by low hills.

The village has very little agricultural land available, much of which has been abandoned, due to the salinisation of the soil, and colonised by spontaneous vegetation. The olive trees (some of which are centuries old) of the esteemed variety known as *kalinjot*, are the main trace of the historical agricultural landscape (Fig. III-3.3).

The lagoon area has been continuously shaped through the centuries. On the 1941 Italian Geographic Military Institute map, the coastal landscape was still dominated by beaches and a vast extension of dunes and ripples. The construction of the *Uzina PVC* (a chemical plant for the production of PVC) and the planting of the Soda Forest (during the Sixties) deeply altered the landscape. The Soda Forest is a maritime pine grove that lies between Zvërnec and Vlorë. It originated as an environmental mitigation and compensation action in the production area. Even though it is considered a green lung of strategic value, today it lies in a state of degradation and abandonment due to environmental pollution and the total lack of maintenance and care.

The area also includes the thermal power plant of Vlorë (TEC), a canal belonging to Vlorë's system of waste-water disposal and an open-air dumps (which are periodically burnt).

The cliffs overlooking the sea and two small fine-sand beaches are the only surviving testimonies of the historic coastal landscape in this area (Figs. III-3.4 and III-3.5).



Figure III-3.3
The agricultural landscape around Zvërnec with vineyards and, in the background, olive trees of the *kalinjot* variety.



4



5

In the hilly area between Kepi i Treportit and the Zvërnec's small harbour, stand the ruins of the walls that once surrounded the ancient settlement of Treporti (*Kështjella e Treportit*, category I Cultural Monument). Several fragments of the ruins can be seen underwater or on the hillside.

An entirely different landscape characterises the Island of Zvërnec, which stands majestically in the southern section of the lagoon, just in front of the village that takes the name from it (Fig. III-3.6). It constitutes today the main tourist destination of the area.

The island is covered by an evergreen forest of *selvi cupressus sempervirens* (with trees up to 10 m) in association with *quercus ilex*, *quercus pubescens* and *pinus spp.* The

Figure III-3.4
A view of a cliffed coastal landscape in Zvërnec.

Figure III-3.5
A view of one of the sandy beaches of Zvërnec.



Figure III-3.6
A view of the Island of Zvërnec from the wooden gangway.



Figure III-3.7
A view of the
lagoon from the
Island of Zvërnec.
In the background,
the Karaburun
peninsula.

planted areas are rather dense and cover almost the entire surface of the island (MedWetCoast, 2004) (Fig. III-3.7).

The forest coexists with a brush vegetation of many species (*myrtus communis*, *pistacia lentiscus*, *laurus nobilis*, *rubus spp.*, *phillyrea angustifolia*, *olea olaster*, etc.) and a limited herbaceous layer colonised by *chrysopogon gryllus*, *asparagus acutifolius*, *dactylis glomerata*, *desmazieria rigida*, etc. (MedWetCoast, 2004).

The island also includes a noteworthy cultural heritage: the Church of the Dormition of Mary, the lodgings of the former Monastery and the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, which is located in the western part of the island, in an exceptionally scenic position (see chap. III.5).

Industrial plants

The Uzina PVC industrial plant was located four kilometres from the north of Vlorë, next to the Soda Forest and to an oil storage plant (Petrolifera Italo-Albanese). Uzina PVC included three chemical substance production units (chlorine, vinyl chloride, and polyvinyl chloride) (UNEP, 2000). Its construction began in 1967 and was completed in 1978. The factory was closed in 1992 and was almost destroyed during the political disorders of 1997 (Fig. III-3.8).

According to the data provided in the analytical framework of the Vlorë General Town Plan, from 1967 to 1992 this plant dumped directly into the sea approximately 500 m³/h of liquid waste with a high mercury content (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 175). The sludge dumped into the sea heavily polluted the nearby beaches and the Gulf of Vlorë, contributing to the enlisting of the area among the nine most polluted sites in Albania (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 127).

Approximately 100 families (1,200 inhabitants) who illegally occupied the plant after its closure, live either in the decayed buildings of the former industrial site or in



Figure III-3.8 – Above and on the next page: Remains of the former Uzina PVC plant.



structures built with recycled materials (EDEN, CRCDC, 2018). This is a real emergency from both a medical and a social standpoint. The inhabitants suffering a severe economic hardship and have no housing alternative.

During the on-field analysis, a high number of dwellings were observed next to the illegal dumps of toxic waste or near the only authorised dumping ground for mercury waste materials. There are some vegetable patches in these polluted soils and it is common to see livestock grazing on the dumps.

In 2002, following the UNEP/MAP¹ mission, the area was identified as an environmental 'hot spot' due to the high levels of mercury, which was over 1,000 times greater than the level permitted by the European Union (EDEN-CRCD, 2018). The polluted area was partially decontaminated following the agreement/concession between the

¹ United Nations Environment Programme/Mediterranean Action Plan (GEF Project GF / ME / 6030-00-08) (EDEN - CRCD, 2018).

Albanian State and the Petrolifera Italo-Albanese company² (2004). During the decontamination works (2005-2006) the Petrolifera Italo-Albanese also demolished part of the factory's warehouses. This action was repeated in 2011, but did not obtain the expected results (EDEN-CRCD, 2018). Surveys carried out in 2018 confirm a high level of pollution, which seriously threatens the health of the inhabitants and hinders the prospects for the development of tourism in the area (EDEN - CRCD, 2018). Among the remaining industrial buildings, the only ones of any interest are two great brick chimney stacks and a silo (Fig. III-3.9).

The Municipality of Vlorë, thanks to recent funding from the European Union, has approved a decontamination and site-rehabilitation project with an estimated cost of 3 million Euros. The project also envisages alternative housing for the people living in the former industrial plant (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 127).

The military heritage

There is a large number of bunkers in the area of the Lagoon of Nartë, which are owned by the Ministry of Defence. Most of them are in disrepair and are usually used as animal shelters. In the area of Zhukë, in particular, near the old riverbed of the Vjosa, there are four monumental bunkers built between 1986 and 1989, during the last years of the Communist regime (Fig. III-3.10). The structures are in an isolated position and in a particularly beautiful landscape. In addition to the hemispherical caps, they include underground spaces whose characteristics could not be ascertained.

Other military assets in the area are the former summer camp of the Albanian army (which stands on a hill that separates the two quarters of the village; see chap. III.4), and the former military airport of Akërne (which was built during the Communist era and is now the subject of a debatable project for converting it into an international airport).

Critical issues and future prospects

The Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë is of a high environmental quality and a remarkable biodiversity. Unfortunately, it has been subjected, over time, to particularly aggressive anthropic actions, which have caused an inherent environmental unsustainability that threatens the entire ecosystem of the area as much as any future projects focused on the tourism development. The environmental degradation has not gone unnoticed, for example, by BirdLife International, which, in its last review

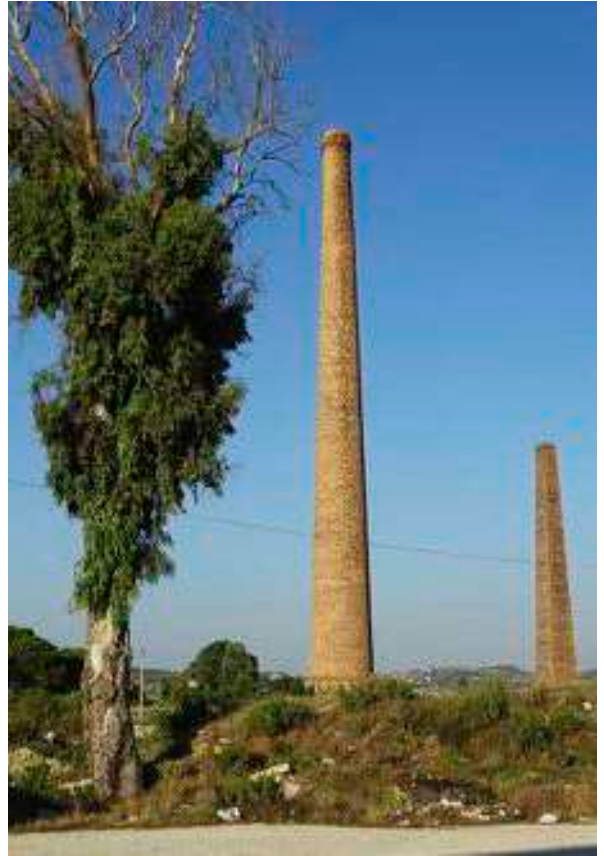


Figure III-3.9
Industrial
archaeology: the
two brick chimney
stacks of the former
Uzina PVC plant.

² Law no. 9231 of 13.5.2004.



Figure III-3.10
Two views of
the monumental
bunkers located on
the plain of Zhukë.

(2017), declared the Lagoon of Nartë as an endangered site with a “very high” threat score³ (Fig. III-3.11).

In order to start a credible enhancement process in terms of sustainable tourism, it is first of all necessary to avoid any new potential threats to the ecosystem of the protected landscape⁴. The Protected Landscape, in fact, can constitute a lasting development opportunity for the local communities, only on the condition that authorised economic uses and practices are compatible with its environmental values and qualities.

It is necessary, at the same time, to implement a series of coordinated actions aimed at resolving pollution-related issues. These actions include the completion of decontamination works, the environmental rehabilitation of the former Uzina PVC plant, the

³ See <<http://datazone.birdlife.org/site/factsheet/narta-lagoon-iba-albania>>.

⁴ This refers, in particular, to the project for an international airport on the plain of Akërne and to a project for a tourist settlement in the area that goes from the beach of Zvrnec to the beach that runs along the lagoon.



Figure III-3.11
Above: The sewage dumping of black waters into the canal that crosses the Soda Forest. *Below:* The authorised dump for mercury wastes. In the background the Petrolifera Italo-Albanese plant.

elimination of illegal dumps, as well as the assessment of the environmental impact of the activities of the Petrolifera Italo-Albanese and of Vlorë's waste water disposal plant.

This approach highlights the need to carry out efficient environmental mitigation works and to embrace the green economy principles. It is a challenging and ambitious endeavour, which depends mostly on the capacity of the national and local institutions to make sustainable choices aimed at the communities' empowerment and on the willingness of the enterprises located in the area to implement ecological conversion processes.

All these actions should be guided by a strategic vision, which combines 'protection' with 'enhancement', placing at its centre the community's aspirations and environment safeguarding policies. The wealth of the habitats and the biodiversity of the protected landscape should be used as a tool for producing well-being and disseminating knowledge, thus going beyond both the purely conservative approach to the landscape and the idea that it is merely an opportunity for tourism-based economic benefits.

Intervention strategies

S1 Education and Training Strategies

A.1 Promoting education and training projects on the biodiversity of the protected landscape

The Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë is an extraordinary educational opportunity and a learning place for both tourists and villagers. The latter are not always aware of the environmental assets of the area they live in.

For this purpose, we propose to undertake educational initiatives and projects focused on topics related to the knowledge and safeguarding of the protected landscape and of its biodiversity.

Extracurricular courses, seminars and on-field educational workshops could be implemented at the schools of the municipalities that belong to the protected area^(a).

During the summer months further educational initiatives based on recreational activities could be carried out. The model of the summer camp for kids and teenagers proposed in chap. III.4 (see A.9) may be a good option.

It would be particularly useful to envisage awareness raising activities aimed at the protection of the environment. Periodic campaigns for cleaning beaches, pine groves and trails within the protected area could be helpful for giving responsibility to the local population and for strengthening environmental awareness and bonding with the places.

Other initiatives aimed at disseminating the importance of the protected landscape could include guided tours and events such as conferences, theatre and land-art workshops. Since the Lagoon of Nartë is an important habitat for migratory birds, it would be advisable to dedicate special projects to this topic^(b).

As a whole, these projects may contribute to the development of individual and social behaviours marked by environmental responsibility and favour active citizenship. They could prove to be useful also for the resolution of socio-economic conflicts that threaten the preservation of the protected landscape.

The National Agency for Protected Areas (Agjencia Kombëtare e Zonave të Mbrojtura) and the Regional Agency for Protected Areas of Vlorë (Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë), are the entities which can better illustrate the environmental features of the territory, the rules and regulations that govern it and the opportunities it offers. They should also guide the development of the educational projects mentioned above. Collaboration between these entities and the Regional Department of Education of Fier (Drejtoria Arsimore Rajonale e Fierit), the schools involved, the local guides and environmentalists, and the NGOs active in the area is needed.

S2 Planning Strategies

A.2 Drafting of an Environmental Monitoring Plan for the Lagoon of Nartë

Considering the industrial past of the area, and especially the pollution caused by the former Uzina PVC plant, it is necessary to carry out research and analysis aimed at assessing the actual conditions of sea and lagoon pollution. This should serve as a preliminary operation in light of the environmental redevelopment of the site and the enhancement of the fish and agro-food heritage.

In order to pursue this aim, the National Agency for the Environment (Agjencia Kombëtare e Mjedisit) could determine/commission an *Environmental Monitoring Plan* for the entire territory of the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë and in particular for the Lagoon of Nartë, which suffers from a complete lack of information concerning the levels of pollution.

Through the *Environmental Monitoring Plan* it could be possible to determine the ecologic state of the lagoon so as to prevent its qualitative and quantitative deterioration, enhance the state of the waters and ensure their sustainable use^(c).

A.3 Drafting of the Environmental Characterisation Plan for the polluted site of the former Uzina PVC plant

The area of the former Uzina PVC plant is highly polluted.

In view of the gravity of the situation, the Municipality of Vlorë has determined a decontamination project, funded by the European Union (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 127). This project envisages, together with the *Environmental Recovery and Decontamination Plan*, a simultaneous *Social Support Plan* aimed at organising and managing the transfer of the 1,200 people currently living within the polluted site to other housing facilities.

Given the absence of official data, it is necessary to carry out a preliminary geological and hydrological analysis of the site and of its level of pollution so as to determine the extension of the area that needs to be decontaminated.

To this purpose, it is recommended to draft an *Environmental Characterisation Plan*, prior to the Environmental Recovery and Decontamination Plan (which consists in the decontamination process, as well as of the necessary environmental mitigation and compensation measures). The *Environmental Characterisation Plan* is a knowledge tool that includes the series of activities necessary for the reconstruction of the polluting events in the environmental compartments (air, water and soil). The aim is to obtain the initial information on which to base subsequent decisions regarding the safety and decontamination of the site^(d).

S5 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.4 Creating a Biodiversity Atlas for the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë

The *Biodiversity Atlas*^(e) has the purpose of gathering the best-known methodologies that have been applied to different international protected areas. It requires cooperation between nature experts and researchers (biologists, botanists, etc.) who, from a multidisciplinary and exchange perspective, can contribute to analysing the current situation and determining a strong knowledge basis for the choices to be made in the future.

This initiative could be promoted and coordinated by the Regional Administration of the Protected Areas of Vlorë (Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë) in collaboration with the National Coast Agency (Agjencia Kombëtare e Bregdetit).

A.5 Creating a Digital Hiking Trail Inventory

See A.7, chap. I.3.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.6 Constructing a green corridor between the Soda Forest and Vlorë

Following the decontamination of the abandoned industrial site described in Action A.3, we suggest the creation of a natural corridor for concealing the production site of the Petrolifera Italo-Albanese plant and determining a continuity between the Soda Forest and the green area on the east coast of Vlorë. Considering the high biodiversity of the lagoon, the corridor should serve a double function: as a natural area and as a linear urban park connecting Zvërnec to Vlorë. It would also create at the same time a biodiversity reserve that would be home to plant species of the protected landscape, as well as offering recreational spaces for inhabitants and tourists.

The redevelopment of the landscape should involve the existing road system, through the planting of autochthonous species of trees and shrubs on the sides of the roads.

A.7 Preserving identity-ascribing elements from the industrial past of the former Uzina PVC plant

The preservation of industrial archaeology features is an opportunity for keeping alive the historical memory of Vlorë's industrialisation process initiated by the Communist regime, so as to celebrate the many inhabitants of the area who worked at the factory and, finally, to ascribe a new meaning to the existing structures.

In particular, the Action proposes the implementation of safety measures, as well as the structural and architectural restoration and also the seismic improvement of the two brick chimney stacks still standing and of a silo.

The chimney stacks, due to their height, could become a regional landmark.

A.8 Enhancing the trail network

See A.13, chap. I.3.

A.9 Promoting the territorial knowledge through soft mobility

See A.11, chap. II.3.

Regarding the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë, the following tourist routes are proposed:

- The Bio-Bicycle Trails, based on bicycle paths, which begin in Vlorë and run through the protected area;
- The Trails of Biodiversity, aimed at the discovery of the habitats of the protected area (Island of Zvërnec, Pishë Poro dunes, the salt pans of Nartë, swamps and canebrakes, the wetlands, the beaches, etc.) and the knowledge of the flora and fauna. The itinerary could be aimed, in particular, at schoolchildren and tourists with an interest in nature and botany;
- The Paths of Culture, with routes that follow the existing trails and lead to places of cultural interest, such as the Church of the Dormition of Mary, the Chapels of Holy Trinity and Saint Athanasius or the monumental bunkers (see A.13). Among the existing cultural routes, worth noting is the one that traverses the old threshing floor (lëma) in the village quarter on the hill and leads to the Island of Zvërnec.

The suggestion is to develop these tourist routes as much as possible on the existing trails, after having them adequately redeveloped.

In order for these itineraries to have a real impact on the territory, it is necessary to carry out a strong marketing campaign and to have the support of the local community, starting with the fishermen, the trekking guides and the institutions (particularly, the Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë).

A.10 Promoting landscape redevelopment projects

A.10.1 Accessibility and redevelopment of the open space surrounding the Chapel of Saint Athanasius

The Chapel of Saint Athanasius enjoys a privileged location on the lagoon. It does not present any particular qualities from an architectural point of view, yet it plays an important role in the lives of the inhabitants of the village.

This Action proposes to link the chapel with the main road of the village (Rruga Zvërnec) through a pedestrian path equipped with facilities and to reconfigure the surrounding area by adding rest areas and scenic viewpoints for contemplating the lagoon landscape. We recommend the use of local materials and that the execution of the works be entrusted to local craftsmen.

A.10.2 Constructing a trail along the Lagoon of Nartë

Given the peculiarities of the lagoon landscape and its high biodiversity, the suggestion is to build a trail that follows the shore of the lagoon and branches off from the Island of Zvërnec toward the northwest, where it would connect with the road that leads to the former school in the quarter on the hill (see chap. III.4).

The trail could cross the various natural environments thanks to wooden boardwalks suspended over the water and to dirt roads, thus giving visitors the opportunity to observe the lagoon and also the plant and animal species that inhabit it from a privileged perspective.

The project must exalt the qualities of the landscape. For this purpose, the choice of the shape, colour and materials used should be based on criteria of landscape continuity with the context. It is also advisable not to alter the existing vegetal structure but rather to enhance it with the addition of new autochthonous plant species.

A.11 Promoting birdwatching

Since the Lagoon of Nartë was declared in 2013 as an “Important Bird and Biodiversity Area” and is the second most important lagoon in Albania in terms of aquatic birds, we propose to incentivise birdwatching, a tourist activity which can be carried out throughout the year.

The Action aims at the construction of a series of bird hides, located at strategic sighting points⁽⁶⁾. These shelters should be easily accessible and equipped with concealing devices and turrets for the observation of avifauna, as well as with descriptive panels on the flora and fauna of the lagoon and on the history of the places. So as to limit environmental impact, their insertion in the delicate lagoon habitat must be carefully studied. It is necessary that they be built using fully reversible materials and techniques, starting with the usage of screw foundations.

The initiative could be coordinated by the Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë with the collaboration of the NGOs operating in the area that are more engaged in environmental enhancement and protection.

A.12 Creating the Dispersed Ecomuseum of the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë

This Action is aimed at the creation of a *Dispersed Ecomuseum*⁽⁸⁾ with the purpose of reconstructing, providing testimony and enhancing – with the active participation of the local communities – the historic memory, the tangible and intangible heritage of the protected area and, in particular, of the Lagoon of Nartë.

The concept of the ecomuseum presumes a network of proposals and activities that aim to describe the cultural resources in which the inhabitants recognise themselves. From this perspective, the *Dispersed Ecomuseum of the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë* would be configured as an enhancement tool for a variety of cultural components and would be divided into several sections.

Two exhibition spaces could be housed in the monumental bunkers at Zhukë (see A.13). The first, devoted to the *Biodiversity Culture*, could make use of films, interactive video-projections and multimedia educational games in order to show, narrate and document the rich and varied environmental heritage and show how the local communities have related to it through time. The second, devoted to the *Salt Culture*, would retrace the history of the centuries-old salt pans (the only salt production area in the whole of Albania) and document their role in the life of the local communities.

A third exhibition space of the Ecomuseum could be located in the former vacation resort of the Albanian army (see A.8, chap. III. 4), and be devoted to *Food Heritage Culture*. In it, and through the typical products of the region (fish, cheese, *vlosh* grapes and olives), the history of the communities of the lagoon could be presented: fishing tools, as well as farming and shepherding tools and the traditional utensils for preparing typical dishes, etc.

With the purpose of creating a network of interconnected places of interest for preserving, safeguarding and enhancing the cultural heritage, these sections of the Ecomuseum could be stages of the route *The Paths of Culture* (see A. 9).

A.13 Recovery and conversion of the monumental bunkers complex in Zhukë

The four monumental bunkers stand in an isolated position and are an interesting opportunity for the creation of a part of the *Dispersed Ecomuseum* proposed in Action A.12.

The project for the recovery of the structure should envisage:

- An accurate survey of the military complex including the underground sections, and the surrounding areas;
 - The project of musealisation and redevelopment of the structures and their surroundings;
 - The repair of the access road, keeping it as a dirt road;
 - The restoration of the buildings and providing the museum with equipment;
 - The installation of renewable energy technological systems.
-

S7 Management strategies

A.14 Entrusting the management of the hiking network of the Protected Landscape of Vjosë-Nartë to a single entity

See A.15, chap. I.3.

In the area under examination, the promotion and maintenance of the trail network could be entrusted to an association created for this purpose and coordinated by the Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë.

Notes

- a) A similar initiative has been undertaken by the NGO CELIM with the project “Azione Comunitaria per la conservazione delle Aree Protette dell’Albania – A.C.A.P.” initiated in 2018. See <https://www.celim.it/progetto/conservazione-delle-aree-protette-in-albania/>
- b) In Italy, a series of worthy projects for the protection and preservation of birds have been undertaken by the Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli (Lipu). See <http://www.lipu.it/progetti-sulle-specie>.
- c) For the Italian context, see Decree no. 152/2006, Title V, arts. 177-266.
- d) See Directive 2000/60/CE.
- e) In Italy, the Environmental Characterisation Plan is envisaged by Decree no. 152 of 3.4.2006.
- f) For Italian initiatives see: (1) Atlas of biodiversity in Parco Adda Sud. First list of the species living in the protected area (https://www.parcoaddasud.it/portale/pubblicazioni-menu/libri/item/download/15_535802d82146a4d3446e8cf4c14f8f1f7.html), (2) Atlas of the flora which is endemic, rare and of community interest in the Riserva Naturale Regionale Monterano (<http://www.parchilazio.it/documenti/pubblicazioni/125_allegato1.pdf>), (3) Coastal lagoon atlas of the Po Delta and, finally, (4) Atlas of biodiversity of the upper basin of the river Oglio (<http://www.parks.it/parco.adamello/gui_dettaglio.php?id_pubb=7080>).
- g) There are already some birdwatching shacks along the path of the salt pans, built by private individuals.
- h) An ecomuseum (with different features and purposes) for the area of the Vjosa River has already been proposed as part of the European Union project IPA Cross-border Programme “Greece-Albania, 2007-2013”. See <http://www.ecomuseum.eu/uploaded/Ecomuseum/Ecomuseum_Guide_06052014.pdf>.

Settlement and buildings

Historical overview

The area in which Zvërnec stands was already inhabited in the 6th - 5th century B.C., as shown by the presence of the remains of the Castle of Treporti, which had an important harbour attached to it¹ (Baçe, 1975). According to some oral testimonies obtained on-site it appears that the first inhabitants of Zvërnec – who came from the Greek coast – reached the area during the Middle Ages and permanently settled on the hill after having settled first on the Island of Sazan. During the second half of the 17th century, Evliya Çelebi describes Zvërnec as a village with 150 families of Christians who worked in the salt marshes or were fishermen (cit. in Dankoff & Elsie, 2000).

There are no remaining traces of the ancient settlement, nor any written sources on the origins of the current village.

Today Zvërnec is composed of two quarters: one on the hill and the other downstream, in the direction of the coast (Fig. III-4.1). The former was recorded on the topographic maps of the Italian Military Geographical Institute (1929-1941)² and in those of the Geographic and Military Infrastructure Institute of Tirana (1959-1965); the latter has gradually developed during the first half of the 20th century and is populated by Vlachs³.

The village saw a period of particular growth during the industrial development of Vlorë in the Seventies.

¹ See In-depth analysis sheet no. 49 “Kartela për trashëgiminë kulturore të paluajtshme”, National Institute for the Cultural Heritage.

² These maps are available online at <<https://geoportal.asig.gov.al/map>>.

³ The presence of the Valchs in Zvërnec must be from an earlier time. From Burileanu (1912) we know that 5 Vlach families lived in Zvërnec in the early 19th century.



Figure III-4.1
Zvërnec. A view of
the quarter on the
hill.

The residential area

Zvërnec is located in an area that remains isolated from the main communication roads. The village is around 9 km from Vlorë. With the exception of an approximately 2 km long section, the road is paved and in relatively good condition.

The two quarters of the village are separated by a hill on which several antennas and radio repeaters are located.

In the quarter on the hill, which faces the lagoon, a clear organisation of the individual urban plots, distributed along the main thoroughfares, can be appreciated. The *Ruga Zvërneci*, which is steeply sloping, runs through the centre of the quarter. It does not have sidewalks and some sections are in a state of disrepair. The old path that is still used to reach the Church of the Dormition of Mary on the Island of Zvërnec during the Marian celebrations of 14-15 August is also in bad condition.

In the downstream quarter, the urban fabric consists of two nuclei of isolated houses separated by cultivated fields. The main road in this quarter is paved and in good condition, and has sidewalks on both sides. The inner streets, however, are in gravel and have no lighting.

The repair of road sections in critical condition is envisaged as part of the regional development by the General Town Plan of Vlorë (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 149).

The traditional dwellings

Typological features

Most of the historical buildings in Zvërnec have been demolished and rebuilt using 'modern' materials and techniques, or else have undergone major alterations, which have completely changed their original appearance.

The few surviving historical buildings are in the quarter on the hill. They are either abandoned or in a state of ruin (Fig. III-4.2). Among the abandoned buildings, two are quite interesting.

The first is a two-storey building constructed during the years of the Communist regime and used as vacation resort of the Albanian army. This building is located in the centre of a slightly sloping area and can be easily reached on foot following the path that connects the two quarters of the village. In front of the building, there is a large



Figure III-4.2
Remains of a
traditional dwelling
in the hill quarter
with horizontal
reinforcing timber
elements.



Figure III-4.3
The former military
vacation resort on
the hill next to the
oldest quarter.

courtyard, today in a state of total decay, which offers a magnificent view of the lagoon. The building measures 20.00 by 12.00 m (Fig. III-4.3).

The other building is the former village school, which was closed in 2007 due to the lack of students. It is adjacent to the quarter on the hill and next to a small square that overlooks the lagoon. The access road is unpaved, yet accessible by car. The building is composed of two volumes: a two-storey structure (approximately 18 by 14 m), and a smaller single-storey one (approximately 14 by 14 m) (Fig. III-4.4).

In the downstream quarter, the buildings were built after the Forties and mostly modified or rebuilt after the Communist regime collapse.

From the analysis of the older residential buildings, only one typology could be observed. Two different variables could be distinguished, both based on a rectangular shape: one with a side ratio of 1: 2 and the other with a side ratio of 2: 5.

Both the buildings show the same interior layout, but differ in structural terms. In the 1: 2 ratio type, only the outer walls are load-bearing, whereas in the other case the interior walls are also load-bearing.

The traditional house was usually one-storey. Occasionally, however, and depending on the plot shape, there was a semi-basement, which served as storehouse (divided into sections depending on the items stored) and as stables. The ground floor, instead, consisted of two rooms and a central entrance/corridor. One of the two rooms housed the hearth (*shtëpia e zjarrit*) and was used for preparing and eating meals; the other was used as a bedroom. Originally, the two levels of the house were not connected internally by means of a staircase, but were only accessible from the outside (Fig. III-4.5).

The recently constructed residential buildings in most cases have a square plan, and are placed at the centre of a courtyard. These are almost exclusively second homes used by their owners during the summer. In the downstream quarter, there are also some houses for renting (partially or totally) to tourists (Fig. III-4.6).

The second homes generally have two levels above ground and share the same interior layout: at the centre there is a corridor that includes the staircase and serves the different rooms: a living room with a dining kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom. Along the main facade (on both levels), there are usually balustrade terraces that offer weather protection. Usually, parents live on the first level, while their children and their respective families live on the upper floor.

Houses for rent usually have 3-4 rooms per floor, each with a kitchenette and a bathroom. In these houses, the staircases are on the outside, so as to make each floor independent. Here, the terraces are also present and guarantee the entrance to each room.

Many buildings are incomplete, with the upper floors unfinished.

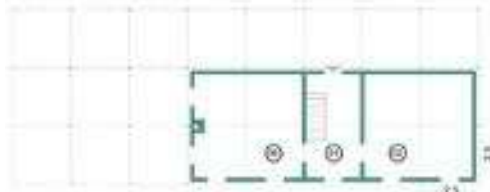
Building features

In traditional buildings, load-bearing walls are in three-leaf stone masonry and have an average thickness of 60-70 cm. The external leaves are made up of uncoursed rubble stones. Gaps between stones are filled with smaller stones and copious quantities of mud mortar. In more recent maintenance works, joints have been repointed with lime mortar. The inner leaf is of smaller pieces of stone and earth.



Figure III-4.4
The former village
school, abandoned
since 2007.

Original layout



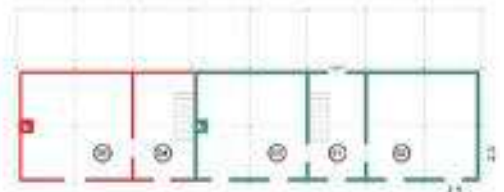
Ground Floor



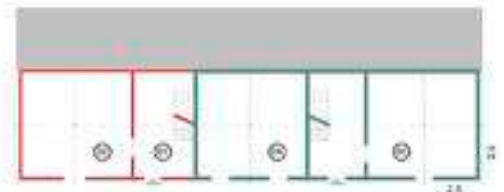
Semi-Basement Floor

01. entrance
02. bedroom
03. harvest storeroom
04. stables and troughs
05. hearth room («shtëpia e zjarrit»)

Transformed layout



Ground Floor



Semi-Basement Floor

5



6

Inside the wall, there are timber tie beams repeated at regular intervals in height (approximately every 60 cm). This technique was found during the surveys also in the nearby village of Nartë, both in residential buildings and in some chapels. The analysis of the buildings revealed a greater care in the execution of corners, for which squared off blocks that are slightly larger than those of the walls were used.

Opening are small and lintels are generally in timber.

Intermediate floors are also in timber. Directly above the beams, wooden boarding serving as paving is placed. In semi-basements, which are used as storerooms or stables, the paving is in rammed earth or in concrete screed.

Bedrooms and living rooms often have false ceilings made with wooden planks.

Roofs are hipped and have a timber structure consisting of trusses with a king post. Above the trusses are joists on which a wooden boarding is placed. The roof covering is made of brick tiles.

The roof pitches are slightly protruding (approximately 10 cm) from the walls by way of jutting bent tiles.

Figure III-4.5
Hypothesis on the original layout of the domestic space and subsequent expansions of two traditional dwellings. [Author: Dritan Kapo]

Figure III.4.6
Examples of a recent building in the downstream quarter.

Partitions have a timber frame covered with woven reeds plastered on both sides. The frame is made of regular vertical elements (studs) floor to ceiling (at a distance of approximately 70 cm one from the other), connected by horizontal elements (cross-beams). Doors and windows, both exterior and interior, are in timber.

The building system used for recent constructions (since the Nineties) is a frame in reinforced concrete, with infill walls and partitions in hollow bricks. Doors, windows and shading systems are generally in aluminium.

Public Space

The urban fabric of Zvërnec has few public spaces.

Only the quarter on the hill has a square, overlooked in the past by the shops and the village school. The square, located near the church, is a rectangular and unpaved space, which on one side faces the Island of Zvërnec. This space is currently in a state of abandonment and used as a car park, and the only remaining places available to the inhabitants of the quarter for social interaction are a shop/bar and the space behind the church (Fig. III-4.7).

Infrastructure network⁴

Some of the village's infrastructure networks are in critical condition and require urgent works.

The situation concerning the water supply is particularly serious. In the past, water was supplied to the quarter on the hill took place, basically, in three different ways: (1) from the village fountains (*çezmat e fshatit*), (2) from individual wells, and (3) from a common well which today is located inside a private courtyard. Toward the late Seventies, the village was connected to the water network coming from Vlorë and a cistern was built on top of the hill that separates the two quarters, including a pump plant. Supply to houses is discontinuous, generally once in three days and the water is not drinkable (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 62). In the downstream quarter, many houses do not use the water main, but rather the water from the well, which, due to its high salinity, is not drinkable. Drinking water in both quarters is ensured by tanker trucks or bottled water purchased from the village shops.

The villagers recount that electricity came to Zvërnec in 1968. The electric supply network has been recently upgraded and its service quality has been greatly enhanced.

The use of solar panels is steadily increasing in both quarters. They are used for producing domestic hot water and for facing the greater electricity consumption that takes place during the summer.

Public lighting is limited to the main streets running through the two quarters.

Zvërnec does not have a sewage system. The disposal of grey and black waters is done mostly by leaching cesspools, generally installed in the courtyards of houses by the owners themselves (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 77). This type of sewage disposal has gradually polluted the underground water and perhaps also the public water supply network, through leaks in the ducts.

The main roads of the village are equipped with a system for the collection and the disposal of rainwater (Fig. III-4.8).

⁴ The description of the conditions of the network infrastructures is based on data taken from the General Town Plan of Vlorë and on information gathered from the inhabitants.



Figure III-4.7
Two views of the currently abandoned square in the centre of the hill quarter. In the background of the photo below, the village church can be seen.

Another critical aspect concerns the malfunctioning of the public waste collection and disposal system. Waste is disposed of in a dump located at the former airport of Akërni and then burnt, together with rubbish coming from the city of Vlorë⁵. Otherwise, the inhabitants leave waste on the sides of the roads just outside inhabited areas, or burn it in the courtyards of their houses.⁶ The issue of the open-air illegal dumps obviously increases during the summer, due to the presence of tourists (Fig. III-4.9).

The General Town Plan of Vlorë envisages the enhancement of network infrastructures. In the specific case of Zvërnec, the following works are planned for the 2017-2021 period:

- Renovation of the potable water supply network, including the installation of new water cisterns;

⁵ In 2018, the Ministry of Infrastructures presented the project for the construction of a dump in the village of Shirisht, which would serve the municipalities of Vlorë, Himarë, Konispol and Sarandë. See www.wbif.eu/project/PRJ-ALB-ENV-009

⁶ The Italian NGO CELIM coordinates a project known as ACAP (“Azione Comunitaria per le Aree Protette” or “Community Action for Protected Areas”), aimed at promoting the recycling of waste.



Figure III-4.8
The poor
conditions of a road
in the hill quarter.

- Assessment of the current state of the waste water disposal systems and installation of a sewage system;
- Introduction of a waste collection and disposal service;
- Repair of roads sections in poor condition (Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 156-161).

Public services, shops and tourist facilities

Zvërnec is a tourist destination visited mainly during the summer. The tourists (mostly families) who stay in the downstream quarter generally choose the beaches of Vlorë, which offer better services and vehicular accessibility than those of the village.

Fragmented and partial tourist information can be found on several official governmental web pages and amateur Facebook pages⁷. Here, basic information on the hotels and the places to visit has been disseminated.

There is an almost total lack of many of the typical (cultural, hiking, recreational and sport) activities of a lagoon or coastal tourist destination.

Medical services consist in a first-aid medical office, which is available only in case of an emergency.

As mentioned above, the quarter on the hill used to have an elementary and middle school, which was closed in 2007 due to the lack of children⁸.

The lack of services is worsened by the bad condition of some sections of the road leading to the quarter on the hill, as well as by the absence of parking spaces and of a public transport service connecting Vlorë to the village.

Accommodation facilities are limited to the downstream quarter, due to their proximity to the beaches. These include two hotels and many guesthouses or rooms for rent, often managed by the parents of owners living abroad⁹.

In the downstream quarter, there are two small restaurants, while in the quarter on hill there is a small bar-general store.

⁷ See for example: <<https://smilealbania.gov.al/fshati-zvernec/>>; <<https://vlora.gov.al/turizem/informacion-per-vizitoret/>>.

⁸ When the field analysis was undertaken (summer of 2019), only five school-age children lived in the village, all of whom went to school in Vlorë.

⁹ As expected, generally these people are not able to offer a competent and professional service.



Figure III-4.9
An illegal open-air
dump just in front
of the lagoon.

Critical issues and future prospects

Considering the results of the analysis undertaken, road repair, as well as the enhancement of network infrastructures and of the waste disposal system, appear to be the most urgent works to carry out in Zvërnec. The situation is critical and has a negative impact on the inhabitants' quality of life and on the balance of the lagoon's ecosystem and, additionally, hinders the development of the tourism sector.

After these priority actions, it would be necessary to redevelop the public spaces and the ancient trails, as well as to activate a public transportation service between the village and Vlorë.

In general, it is necessary to activate intervention strategies that involve the few resident inhabitants, as well as the villagers who have emigrated abroad and the NGOs operating in the area. It is also pivotal to undertake a campaign to promote the image of the village, based on its landmarks (the island with its church, the coast, the pine grove, the hill with its ancient olive trees, etc.), on other 'minor' places (such as the Chapels of the Holy Trinity and of Saint Athanasius) or others which are shamefully neglected, like the area of the Castle of Trepoti.

The Rules and qualitative regulations for strategic investments in sites with a national importance for the development of tourism¹⁰ has identified Zvërnec as one of the priority areas, envisaging the construction of a tourist accommodation complex that includes a five-star Ecolodge Resort, a golf course and 100 timber cottages. A project of this magnitude risks endangering a vast area of the Lagoon of Zvërnec-Novoselë (a section of the wider Lagoon of Nartë), a particularly fragile ecosystem including a range of habitats in a precarious balance (see chap. III.3).

¹⁰ This document – "Rregulloret dhe parametrat cilësore për investimet strategjike në vëndet e rëndësishë kombëtare për zhvillimin e turizmit" – is part of the General Town Plan of Vlorë and has been approved by the Municipal Council through the Act no. 64 of 31.08.2017.

Intervention strategies

S2 Planning Strategies

A.1 Assessing the environmental and social impact of the construction of a tourist resort in the area of the Lagoon of Zvërnec-Novoselë

The Rules and qualitative regulations for strategic investments in sites with a national importance for the development of tourism envisage the construction of a tourist accommodation complex in a vast area of the Lagoon of Zvërnec-Novoselë. This area is very important in ecological terms due to the variety of natural environments included within it.

For the purpose of environmental safeguarding, our suggestion is to submit this project to an *Environmental Impact Assessment* (EIA), in accordance with the European Union Council Directive 85/337/EEC. The EIA could identify and assess the direct and indirect effects of the works envisaged in the project on the environmental components of the area so as to prevent, reduce and, if necessary, compensate the negative effects they may entail.

Considering the inevitable consequences of this intervention on the local communities, it would be necessary at the same time to develop a *Social Impact Assessment* (SIA). It consists in an analysis of the social context and is aimed at highlighting the social sustainability of the project and its effective capacity to generate value for the inhabitants.

Within a perspective of local development based on the priorities and needs outlined by local stakeholders and beneficiaries themselves, the SIA should focus mainly on the following specific objectives:

1. Exploring the main strengths and weaknesses of the considered case, also evaluating its replicability on other areas as a successful model;
2. Understanding the main relations among relevant local stakeholders and local residents;
3. Collectively identifying and evaluating potential innovative policies at a community level.

The relevant social impacts could be identified through the definition of specific indicators of 'social values' (e.g. Awareness/Educational; Visual impact, Nuisance and Pollution; Well-being and Recreation, etc.). Benefits could be evaluated based on the results of in-depth interviews (see Beinat & Nijkamp, 1998). Further social values could be added according to specific results emerging from stakeholder interviews (see da Rocha *et al.* 2017).

The results of social assessment (SIA) need to be considered together with the results of the environmental assessment (EIA). Thus, we suggest conducting part of the environmental and social analysis of the place in an integrated manner.

Finally, we recommend the periodic monitoring of the environmental and social impact of the works undertaken by the project once in use, following Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) methods (Patton, 2014).

S4 Living Quality Strategies

A.2 Upgrading the technological systems in the houses of the village

See Action A.3, chap. II.4

Works for enhancing the network infrastructures of Zvërnec are already envisaged by the General Town Plan of Vlorë.

We suggest that an in-depth study of the quality of the waters and of the impact of domestic waste waters on the soil, the underground and the aquifers be carried out.

A.3 Enhancing the waste collection system

This Action is aimed at intervening on the management of domestic waste, so as to enhance the living conditions of the community, tourism development, and to safeguard the protected area.

For this purpose, it would be necessary to extend the door to door waste recycling system (promoted and implemented in 2018 by the NGO CELIM, through the ACAP^(a)) project to the entire village, and to provide adequate rubbish bins where waste is more usually dumped.

A.4 Installing public fountains^(b)

The supply of potable water in Zvërnec is carried out mainly through tanker trucks or by the purchasing of bottled water.

The widespread use of water bottled in plastic, in addition to being costly to the inhabitants, also has a heavy impact on the environment and on public health. In fact, the prevailing method for disposing of plastic bottles in the village is through combustion.

In order to prevent this, and while waiting for the supply of drinking water to the village houses to be provided by the public water system, we propose that two drinking water fountains be installed, one for each quarter. In both cases, the choice of the water purification method will depend on the microbiological and chemical analysis of the water.

The Action is also aimed at re-considering the public fountain, which also in Zvërnec historically played an important role in terms of social interaction.

The Action could be implemented with the support of the NGOs that operate in the area, in agreement with the Municipality of Vlorë.

A.5 Upgrading of some sections of the existing vehicular roads and construction of a public parking area

With the purpose of enhancing the quality of life of the inhabitants and the tourism supply we recommend the following:

- Repair the pavement of certain sections of the main road that leads to the quarter on the hill and repair the minor roads of both quarters;
- Build a public parking area with no more than 30 parking spaces (cf. Bashkia Vlorë, 2017: 197), to be located at the crossroads of the street that goes to the island and the one that goes down to the beach. With the purpose of mitigating the impact on the lagoon environment and avoiding traffic jams, it would be convenient to locate it in an unobtrusive location and to follow the indications of Action A.7, sect. I.4.1.

A.6 Establishing a public transport line connecting Zvërnec and Vlorë^(c)

See A.8, sect. I.4.1.

A.7 Establishing a tourist information centre in the downstream quarter

This Action is aimed at establishing an info point to provide tourists with information concerning the environmental assets of the area and the recreational and cultural activities it offers, as well as to organise guided visits to the lagoon (either on foot, by bicycle or boat) and to offer a bicycle rental service.

This info point (which should include an ATM) could be placed at the entrance of the downstream quarter, and be built by the Regional Agency of the Protected Areas of Vlorë (Administrata Rajonale e Zonave të Mbrojtura Vlorë) in collaboration with the Municipality of Vlorë. Its management could be entrusted to a community cooperative.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.8 Renovation of the former vacation resort of the Albanian army and its transformation into an exhibition space.

The Action is aimed at transforming the premises of the former vacation resort of the Albanian army, located on the hill that separates the two quarters of the village, into an exhibition space devoted to the *typical products and culinary tradition of the area of the lagoon*, as part of the *Dispersed Ecomuseum of the Protected Landscape* described in Action A.12, chap. III.3.

Next to the exhibition spaces, the building could house spaces devoted to tasting and purchasing of local typical products.

The building, partially collapsed, stands in a place of remarkable landscape beauty, with an outstanding view over the lagoon. For this reason, we recommend recovering the surrounding spaces for open-air activities such as exhibitions, cultural events, etc. Taking advantage of the sloping nature of the terrain, a small open-air amphitheatre could be built on the southern side of the building and be used for events and gatherings.

Given the landscape features of the area, the redevelopment works of the open spaces and of the paths should respect criteria of landscape continuity by choosing equipment consistent with the context and by planting only autochthonous plant species.

As for the recommendations concerning the project of recovery of the building see Action A.2, sect. I.4.1.

A.9 Creating a Summer Camp for children and teenagers at the former school of Zvërnec

This Action proposes a *Summer Camp* for children and teenagers as a concrete and effective solution for disseminating the culture and values of the lagoon environment among the young, combining education and environmental awareness with playing and recreational activities (A.1, chap III.3). Participants could be involved in activities connected to the welcoming tourists visiting the Island of Zvërnec. The camp could be located at the former village school, which is currently unused. We suggest that the following spaces be included in it:

- A multi-functional area;
- Lodgings;

- A kitchen for preparing breakfast and quick meals;
- Toilets and showers;
- A space for the janitor.

For recommendations on the project for the recovery of the building see Action A.2, sect. I.4.1

In addition to the building, we suggest that the surrounding space be redeveloped as well, including the square opposite the school, to be used either for playing or for workshops.

For the Action to succeed, collaboration is necessary between the middle and high schools of the Municipality of Vlorë, the local entities (such as the Regional Agency for the Protected Areas of Vlorë) and the NGOs of the area involved in actions related to the protection of nature.

A.10 Redeveloping the square in the quarter on the hill

For the general requirements of the square, see A.13, chap. II.4.

A.11 Recovering the old road that connects the quarter on the hill to the Island of Zvërnec

This Action is aimed at recovering the ancient path that traverses the only threshing floor (*lëma*) of the village and leads to the Island of Zvërnec.

The restoration of the path must be considered as a preliminary work aimed at its inclusion among the cultural itineraries proposed in Action A.9, chap. III.3.

For further information concerning redevelopment works see A.9, sect. I.4.1.

Notes

- a) The ACAP (“Azione Comunitaria per le Aree Protette” or “Community Action for Protected Areas”) project currently envisages the door-to-door recycling of waste only in the quarter on the hill and the placement of rubbish recycling containers near restaurants. The main problem is the disposal of waste once it has been collected.
- b) A particularly interesting project was promoted by the Agenzia Comunale Energia (ACEA) in Rome, as part of the “Case dell’acqua” project. The “Case dell’acqua” (or “water houses”) are multifunctional devices installed in Rome and its province which in addition to supplying drinking water also provide the services of charging the batteries of tablets and smartphones and accessing public information through their digital displays. For more in-depth information visit <<https://www.gruppo.acea.it/al-servizio-delle-persone/acqua/le-case-dellacqua>>.
- c) Similar initiatives aimed at enhancing the connections of isolated villages to larger urban centres using public transport are found in a number of Italian contexts (for example in the Municipality of Castel Gandolfo, in the province of Como, and in the Municipality of Empoli, in Tuscany).

The Church of the Dormition of Mary on the Island of Zvërnec

The Island of Zvërnec is in symbiosis with the Lagoon of Nartë and constitutes a reference point for the village community, as well as an important and picturesque tourist destination.

It can be reached from the mainland via a curved wooden gangway, rebuilt in 2014, which offers the visitors a dynamic perspective of the island.

In addition to its landscape values (see chap. III.3), the island also has a historical tradition, primarily represented by the Monastery of Zvërnec. The complex consists today of a Byzantine church and the buildings of the lodgings which seem to date back to the 19th century¹. There are also some ruins of other buildings on the island, which presumably belonged to the monastic complex. Among the lodgings, there is also a newly built structure, clearly distinct from the others due to the materials and construction techniques used (Figs. III-5.1 and III-5.2).

Adjacent to the church, around the apsidal area, is a small cemetery with approximately ten tombstones. Among these, the tomb of a well-known figure linked to the Albanian Renaissance is found: Marigo Pozio, the woman who embroidered the flag that was waved on the day of the Declaration of Independence in 1912.

To the rear of the church, there is dense woodland. In addition to the buildings of the Monastery and of the Church of the Dormition of Mary, on the western side of the island there is also a chapel devoted to the Holy Trinity, probably built around 1870.

Until the late Sixties, the island was not accessible to villagers or visitors, since the Communist authority had turned it into an internment camp for political dissidents.

¹ The only useful reference for dating the buildings of the monastery is found in a report of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (NICH) written in 1977 and signed by its director at the time, Sotir Kosta. The Albanian term *konak* (now archaic) was used to indicate lodgings where to spend the night during long voyages.



Figure III-5.1
The Island of
Zvërnec from the
mainland, with
the lodgings of the
monastery in the
foreground. *Above:*
A photograph
from the late
Sixties [Courtesy:
NICH]. *Below:* The
situation as it is
today.

Historical and typological overview

The original part of the Church of the Dormition of Mary (category I Cultural Monument) has been dated back to the 13th-14th centuries, based on its building features and the comparison with other similar buildings in Albania (Meksi 1975; 2016) (Fig. III-5.3).

The current layout of the church – referred to in the literature also as a “chapel” (*kapela*), due to its small dimensions (Meksi 1975; 2016) – is the result of two different building phases.



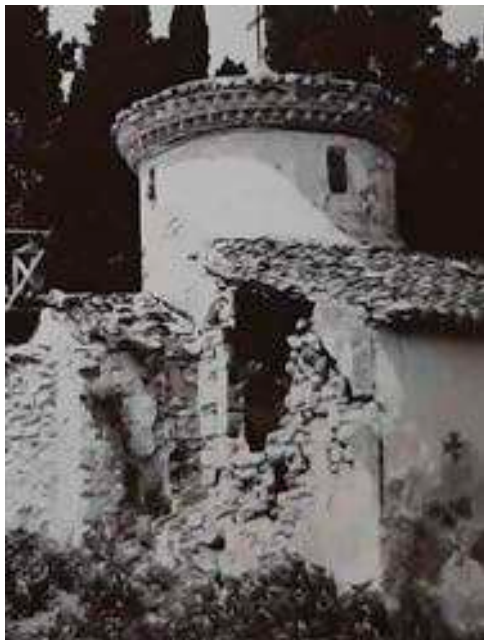
Figure III-5.2
A south-east view
of the Church of
the Dormition of
Mary.

The Byzantine layout consists of the classical tripartite division: narthex, naos and bema. The bema is separated from the naos by the iconostasis and ends with a semi-cylindrical apse. The church belongs to the free-cross type with a dome resting on a cylindrical drum². The passage from the square space of the crossing to the drum of the dome takes place through four classical pendentives, characterised by a different brickwork pattern.

The exonarthex was added to the north of the original structure and the portico to the east. The masonry discontinuity between the original structure of the church and the subsequent additions can be easily detected. As a consequence of these additions, the entrance to the church is through the portico (on the lesser side of the narthex), rather than from the north side (greater side of the narthex), as it was originally. The current portico and exonarthex probably date back to 1862, as the date engraved onto a portico stone seems to indicate. Some details (a different paving and bigger arches in the portion corresponding to the exonarthex) suggest that the current portico might be an enlargement of an older one (Fig. III-5.4). Together with the exonarthex, a bell-gable was also built onto the north facade. It is possible that 1862 is also the year when the other buildings of the monastic complex around the church were built (Gega, 1985).

A feature that attracts attention is the orientation of the building. In fact, the church is not placed canonically along the east-west axis, but along the north-south axis instead, with the apse located to the south and the main entrance (in the original version) to the north. This orientation could have been conditioned by possible pre-existing structures located along the perimeter of the area on which the church stands, which

² There is only one other church with the same layout in all of Albania: the church of Marmirò, located to the south of the Gulf of Vlorë (Meksi *et al.*, 2016).



3



4

Figure III-5.3
A view of the
collapsed apsidal
area at the end of
the Sixties. The
exterior walls and
the drum were
still plastered.
[Courtesy: NICH]

Figure III-5.4
An interior view of
the portico.

compelled the access from the north. Otherwise, the choice might have been due to the wish to offer the visitors arriving to the island an at least partial view of the main facade of the church, rather than of the apse. On the other hand, orienting the church along the east-west axis would have been quite difficult, because the visitor would thus have been forced to unnaturally circumvent the building in order to reach its entrance on the side of the forest (Fig. III-5.5).

Above the architrave of the original entrance door, a decorative pattern with three blind arches can be seen (Fig. III-5.6). It seems to indicate a stylised version of a *tribelon* (a recurring feature in Byzantine architecture, which links the narthex to the naos) (Krautheimer, 1986; Ćurčić, 2010)³. The same configuration can also be seen on the fronts of the eastern and western arms of the cross. The decorative pattern can be fully appreciated especially on the front of the western arm, where it is part of a more organised structure that juts out from the facade (Fig. III-5.7). It can be presumed that the same jutting wall pattern also characterised the northern facade, where, as mentioned before, the original entrance of the church was located.

The wooden iconostasis is finely carved and seems to belong to the 19th century post-Byzantine tradition. As in other Albanian Orthodox churches, it has been unfortunately tampered with and is lacking its original icons. Near the western wall of the narthex, there is a tombstone on the floor, with stylistic features that suggest the influence of European Renaissance art. On a corner of the exonarthex there is a stone basin similar to a holy water font which was probably also used as a baptismal font.

³ A 13th century Byzantine church in the South of Albania that has a proper *tribelon* is the Church of Saint Nicholas in Mesopotam. It constitutes the *katholikòn* (and the only surviving building) of a monastic complex. See Macchiarella (2011).

Building system

The load-bearing walls of the church probably consist of three-leaf masonry with a thickness of around 75-80 cm. The two external leaves are made up mainly of uncoursed rubble stone held together with lime mortar. The stones are sandstones made up of porous limestone; they are therefore stones of sedimentary and mainly organogenic (fossiliferous calcareous) origin. Ashlars are used exclusively for the corners, the decorative strips on the fronts of the eastern and western arms and for the jambs and voussoirs of the arches of the portico and also of the arches supporting the cupola. Connections between orthogonal walls are well made.

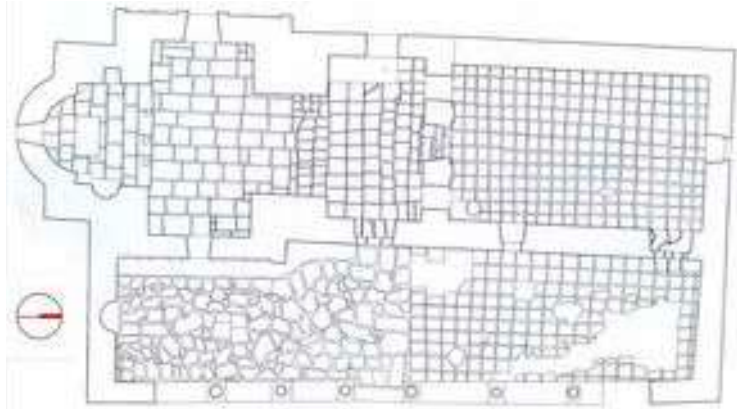


Figure III-5.5
The church plan.
[Courtesy: NICH]

In the facade walls, there are brick inserts, mostly on the oldest part of the church, but when compared with period photographs it is clear that some of these inserts are the result of more recent restoration works. The drum of the dome presents a *cloisonné* masonry made of stones and bricks while the bell-gable is made of bricks.

The stone foundations suffer from the constant stress caused by the movement of the clayey soil below which, in contact with abundant underground water, frequently dilates and contracts (At Theologos *et al.*, 2001).

The columns of the portico (six in total) are made of regular drums of fossiliferous calcareous stone. Some of these have been replaced or repaired during the various restoration works, yet are still in a serious state of decay, which threatens the stability of the portico.

The cupola is entirely built with bricks. The top of the intrados of the cupola is plastered and some portions of a wall painting are still visible on it (Fig. III-5.8).

At the base of the drum a narrow strip of slightly protruding bricks is also visible. It may indicate the existence of an older dome, which was placed directly on the pendentives and that probably at some point collapsed and was replaced by the current one. The barrel vaults on the arms of the cross and on the narthex are made of stones and bricks, whereas the supporting arches are built using exclusively stone voussoirs.

In the intersection between the barrel vaults of the northern arm of the cross and of the narthex (which are perpendicular to one-another) a complex spatial and structural solution (a three-dimensional arch) takes shape⁴, revealing the refined building expertise of the master builders and craftsmen who worked at the church. With the exception of the wall where the original entrance of the church was located, the walls and the vault of the exonarthex are plastered. In this space there are three wooden tie rods, one of which has a steel tie rod above it.

The current timber structure and tiles of the roof were replaced during the restoration work in 2001. Unfortunately, the roof was covered using industrially produced clay

⁴ An example of a three-dimensional arch can be found on the second level of Saint Sophia's narthex in Istanbul.



6



7



8

Figure III-5.6
The original
entrance of the
church, now
integrated into the
exonarthex.

Figure III-5.7
The front of the
western arm of
the cross with the
triple-blind-arch
pattern.

Figure III-5.8
A view of the
intrados of the
dome.



Figure III-5.9
A view that highlights the chromatic difference between the roof covering of the church and that of the lodgings.

bent tiles, which are questionable both in terms of the preservation of the value of the monument and of the aesthetic impact on the building⁵ (Fig. III-5.9).

The pavings are in stone slabs, except for the exonarthex and a portion of the portico, which are paved in terracotta tiles.

Except for the four windows on the drum, all the openings have timber frames and glass panes.

State of conservation

The church has undergone different restoration works (Fig. III-5.10).

A 1977 report of the former Institute of the Cultural Monuments (Instituti i Monumenteve të Kulturës-IMK) (see note 1. of this chapter), refers to a significant work that was carried out in 1972⁶. Some photographs kept at the archive of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage, which date back to 1968, show the church in a serious state of disrepair: whole parts had collapsed (especially in the area of the apse), the masonry was damaged and the columns were in an advanced state of decay. The 1972

⁵ In the 2001 restoration project report, the covering of the roof was to be done using new 'Byzantine' clay tiles, in a colour similar to those of the lodgings. Unfortunately, while performing the work this was not respected.

⁶ The main restoration works were carried out in 1972 and 2001. The last restoration project dates back to 2018 and at the time of the drafting of these Guidelines it had not yet been implemented. The authors had the opportunity to observe, through some photographs, the results of the implementation of this project shortly before the delivery of the book drafts to the publisher. They decided, however, not to modify the content of the text concerning the analysis of the monument, nor the recommendations regarding its restoration (see A.2), as a testimony of what, in their opinion, would have been the most respectful strategy towards the history of the monument. See <https://orthodoxalbania.org/2020/2020/05/20/vijojne-punimet-per-restaurimin-e-kishes-se-manastirit-te-fjetjes-se-hyjlandeses-ne-ishullin-e-zvernecit/?fbclid=IwAR2wC9WcKacb5EW211Fbo3i5H7Xtxwwu_lvf8tKH7dnolNDg6LUI5ZOVFY>.

restoration works must have therefore been decisive for the monument's recovery. In fact, the 1977 IMK report only mentions the need for maintenance works concerning the church⁷.

During the restorations in 2001, several works were carried out which radically modified the appearance of the monument. The main works involved the removal of the plaster (which was seriously decayed according to the report of the restoration project)⁸ that covered the exterior surfaces of the building and the aforementioned replacement of the roof. Through these works (and perhaps, also by creating decorative patterns especially on the exterior of the drum and of the apse), the church was aligned to the dominant appearance of Byzantine religious architecture. It cannot be excluded that the plaster had been there since the beginning. In those cases where the walls did not possess an evident decorative value, the churches were often plastered, especially in outlying areas such as Zvërnec (Ousterhout, 1999; Ćurčić, 2010).

It is certain though, that concern about the exposure of the bare walls to the particularly aggressive weather conditions of the lagoon had convinced those in charge of the 2001 restoration project to accompany the removal of the plaster with an appropriate protective wall coating (At Theologos *et al.*, 2001). It is unclear, however, if this protective coating was actually applied. The fact is that some parts of the walls are in a serious condition of disrepair. There is a noteworthy loss of surface material, as well as deterioration of the mortar joints.

Despite the rebuilding of the roof, water leaks are still an unsolved problem. There are traces of water leaks in all the vaults of the church, particularly in the exonarthex.

In order to prevent rising damp, in 2001 the perimeter of the church was surrounded by a channel for collecting and disposing of the rainwater that falls on the roof and flows on the sloping ground to the west of the building. The drain channel (50 cm deep by 20 cm wide and covered with stone slabs) does not seem to have solved the problem.

As far as structural decay is concerned, the elements that most need attention are the columns of the portico⁹. From information gathered on-site and from an interview with Prof. Pirro Thomo¹⁰, it appears that the first column to the south (the most damaged one) was relieved of its load-bearing function thanks to a steel beam placed tangentially to the top of the arches. The two columns of the central arch and the last column to the north are also in an advanced state of decay. The will of prof. Thomo not to substitute the damaged columns appears comprehensible, even after considering the inadequacy of the columns for their proper structural function. These eroded elements, have in fact become a connoting and almost symbolic feature of the image of the church (Fig. III-5.11).

⁷ From this report, we know that the *konakë* (lodgings) of the monastery were in a serious state of disrepair. In the 1980s, a restoration campaign was launched which affected only the building to the east.

⁸ The report includes some photographs that confirm the presence of exterior plastering.

⁹ The columns were greatly eroded (in some cases their diameter had been reduced to a few centimetres) already in 1976, as shown by a survey report (signed Mati Baba) and by the photographs of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage archive. In the restoration projects of 1985, 2001 and 2010 the substitution of the most damaged columns was envisaged, whereas in the 2018 project the strategy consisted in consolidating them with an exterior steel frame. However, it appears that during the restoration works carried out on May 2020, the substitution option prevailed.

¹⁰ Prof. Pirro Thomo participated in the 2001 restoration as a scientific adviser.



Figure III-5.10
Starting from above:
The church before,
during and after the
restoration works
carried out in 2001.
[Courtesy: Pirro
Thomo]

The iconostasis presents several issues: stains, colour loss, mildew and repeated xylophagous insect attacks.

The church currently has an intruder alarm system and interior and exterior video-surveillance¹¹, as well as a lighting system. These systems are visually invasive, with exposed superficial cables along the walls, and do not comply with safety standards.



Figure III-5.11
The eroded
columns of the
portico as symbolic
image of the
church.

¹¹ A custodian who lives in the proximity of the church ensures surveillance of the building.

Intervention strategies

S2 Knowledge and Safeguarding Strategies

A.1 Preliminary analysis of the church, of the other buildings and of the open spaces on the Island of Zvërnec

The Island of Zvërnec presents an architectural and landscape heritage of undoubted value, which should be seen as a coherent whole, including the churches and other historical buildings in dialogue with the Lagoon of Nartë and with the dense woodlands.

The drafting of a comprehensive programme of works for the redevelopment of the buildings and of the open spaces on the Island of Zvërnec (see A.2) supposes a preliminary analysis structured into the following activities:

- Environmental overview;
- Analysis of the access routes and of the trails within the woods;
- Analysis of the existing tree species, both autochthonous and imported;
- Analysis of the building history and of the restoration works. In order to determine a comprehensive framework it is necessary to consult the Central State Archive of Albania (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit) and also the archives of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage and the Institute of History. A precious source, but more difficult to access, would be the archive of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania. Some records belonging to the Orthodox Church are, however, available at the Central State Archive of Albania, where they were collected during the years of the Communist regime (Rembeci, 2017). Consultation of archival material dating back to the 13th to 19th centuries requires palaeographic competencies, as well as knowledge of Mediaeval Greek and Ottoman Turkish;
- Geometrical, photographic and technological survey of the buildings, including the necessary thematic charts for defining the action proposals^(a);
- Typological analysis of the buildings and identification of any additions to the original structures;
- Analysis of the construction techniques, of the building annexes and of the open spaces, including the cemetery;
- Analysis of the state of material degradation;
- Analysis of the mineral composition of the stones, bricks and mortars of the Church of the Dormition of Mary;
- Analysis of the general state of conservation of the buildings so as to understand causes and mechanisms of structural failures and decay phenomena;
- Survey of the buildings' crack patterns.

S4 Living Quality Strategies

See A.4 sect. I.4.2.

S6 Enhancement Strategies

A.2 Drafting a project for the integrated recovery of the church, the buildings and the open spaces on the Island of Zvërnec

This Action proposes a series of works that concern the buildings and the open spaces on the island. Each proposal has been conceived within an integrated and unitary vision that respects the precious environmental context in which the island is situated. The proposed works should pursue the following objectives:

- Preserving the identity of the buildings, based upon international restoration principles and regulations^(b);
- Eliminating or replacing those elements which alter the integrity of the building (additions, inconsistent materials, etc.);
- Enhancing the seismic performance of the building in accordance with the technical regulations in force;
- Improving the accessibility of the buildings and of the open spaces while safeguarding the features and identity of the places;
- Using, whenever possible, design solutions based on the principles of environmental sustainability;
- Upgrading technological and hygienic-sanitary systems in a way that is compatible with the typological, architectural and structural features of the buildings.

RESTORATION WORKS CONCERNING THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION OF MARY

- *Structural consolidation of the columns of the portico.* This work is of utmost urgency due to the serious state of decay of some of the columns. It is necessary, first of all, to assess the effectiveness of the works carried out during past restorations and to identify the precise mineral composition of the stone material of the columns (see A.1). Thereafter, the structural strengthening project needs to be designed, without forgetting the importance of the eroded columns as a symbolic image of the church;
- *Restoration of the walls.* The degradation regards especially the exterior walls of the church. The conservation works should be based on a careful analysis of the stones, bricks and mortars (see A.1). It is necessary to clean and repoint the joints and to replace any broken or decayed stone or brick elements. Afterwards, the walls should be coated with specific substances that assure protection against the aggressive action of the salty air;
- *Waterproofing of the roof.* The roof, especially in the section covering the exonarthex, suffers periodically from water leaks. The waterproofing works should pay careful attention to the areas connecting the pitches and between the pitches and the walls;
- *Replacement of the covering of the roof.* The current covering of the roof in extruded clay bent tiles, clashes both in terms of texture and colour with the overall image of the church and of the adjacent historical buildings. Our suggestion is therefore to remove the existing covering and to replace it with hand-made bent tiles, which fully resemble those used in the past^(c);
- *Control of rising damp.* It is necessary to identify the causes of rising damp and to periodically clean the perimeter drain channel so as to prevent stagnation of rainwater. We recommend replacing the plaster of the exonarthex (where traces of rising damp are more evident) with a breathable and compatible lime-based plaster^(d);
- *Assess the structural efficiency of the timber tie-rods of the exonarthex.* The timber tie-rods of the exonarthex have problems regarding their toothing to the walls. Currently, there is only one reinforcing steel tie rod. With the aim of ensuring the resistance of the building to horizontal actions, it is necessary to value the possibility of extending this measure to all the timber tie-rods;
- *Assess the conditions of the bell frame.* The timber structure of the bell frame appears to be in an advanced state of decay. It is necessary to assess its condition and if needed to replace the damaged sections with parts consistent with the traditional material and techniques;
- *Works regarding the paving.* The brick paving of the exonarthex and of a section of the portico should be replaced with stone slabs of the same type as those used in the rest of the church floor^(e);
- *Works regarding the drum openings.* The drum openings have no windows. It is therefore necessary to contemplate adequate protection so as to prevent water leaks and animal intrusions;
- *Restoration of the iconostasis.* The wooden iconostasis has been heavily tampered with throughout the years, including the replacement of the original icons with bad quality prints^(f). It is necessary to programme a general restoration of the iconostasis, to be carried out by wood restoration specialists and to commission copies of the missing icons from expert iconographers, in accordance with the classical canons of traditional Byzantine painting;
- *Removal of invasive vegetation.* Both the exterior walls and the roof of the church present traces of invasive vegetation. So as to limit the damage that the roots of the plants can cause to the building, it is necessary to remove the vegetation and to ensure periodic maintenance;
- *Upgrading of the technological systems of the church.* The 2001 report of the restoration project indicated that the technological systems were to be designed and implemented at a later date; there are no subsequent documents discussing this issue. The current systems seem to be the result of sporadic and patchy works and are incompatible with the historical value of the building and with safety regulations, and should therefore be replaced. Furthermore, a protection system against atmospheric discharges, ensuring the least possible visual impact, as well as a fire protection system should be installed.

RESTORATION WORKS CONCERNING THE CHAPEL OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Based on the results of on field observations, it is advisable to undertake the following works: (1) restoration of the masonry including crack repairing, using traditional techniques, (2) protection of the walls from rising damp, (3) replacement of the door and windows, and (4) replacement of the current roof covering with hand-made clay bent tiles.

RECOVERY AND CONVERSION OF THE MONASTERY LODGINGS

The buildings in question are two: the long compact structure to the east of the island, and an isolated building to the north. The following spaces could be envisaged in the first of these buildings:

- A tourist reception and info point, including a bookshop;

- Small apartments for renting to visitors, scholars and researchers interested in the protected area, or for the faithful who come to Zvěrnec from other regions on the occasion of the Feast of the Dormition of Mary. In this way, the original function of the building might be, at least in part, restored;
- A small cafeteria;
- Toilets.

The building to the north, instead, could be used as the custodian's house.

DEMOLITION OF THE RECENTLY BUILT STRUCTURES

Near the church, to the north, there is a recently built structure (probably built during the years of the Communist regime). This building has no special value and we suggest, therefore, that it be demolished in order to recover the green area in which it stands.

WORKS RELATED TO OPEN SPACES

As far as the regeneration of the open spaces is concerned, we suggest that the natural value of the landscape of the island be respected, preserving the autochthonous species and safeguarding the features of the historical architectural elements.

In particular, we suggest that the following works be carried out:

- Designing the path leading from the wooden gangway to the church;
- Redeveloping the unpaved trails for exploring the island, including the appropriate signage;
- Establishing rest areas equipped with facilities, adequately shaded, both in proximity of the church and along the trails that traverse the woods;
- Restoration and renovation of the area of the cemetery adjacent to the church. The area is currently in a state of abandonment. In order to preserve its value as a historical testimony, it is necessary to provide for the restoration of the tombstones and of the wrought iron artefacts that enclose them; in order to make it more accessible and usable, it is necessary to repair the cemetery inner paths;
- Installing an adequate lighting system for both the buildings and the paths. The wooden gangway that leads to the mainland could be illuminated with walk over LED spotlights, a solution capable of creating a very evocative effect;
- Installing a fall prevention/protection system for the gangway that connects the island to the mainland. If a railing were considered too invasive, it could be useful to mark the edges of the gangway with visual and tactile signals situated on the floor level;
- Restoration and maintenance of the enclosure wall surrounding the monastery using, as much as possible, the materials available on-site.

A.3 Creating an information and communication system

On the Island of Zvěrnec, currently, there is no street signage and no information panels describing the history of the monastery and its natural environment.

It is therefore advisable to place adequate signage that from Vlorë could guide the visitors toward the island, through the Soda Forest and the downstream quarter of Zvěrnec. On the island, in addition to the placement of descriptive panels, brochures and maps could be distributed at the tourist reception and info point proposed in Action A.2.

S5 Management Strategies

A.10 Monitoring of the building

See A.6, sect. I.5.1.

A.11 Drafting of a Maintenance Plan of the Island of Zvěrnec

See A.7, sect. I.5.1.

Once established, the plan could be implemented by the villagers themselves, through voluntary work at the service of the community that would cover the simpler and less strenuous tasks.

Notes

- a) The lack of updated surveys of the cultural monuments is a critical issue in the Albanian context, which over the past few years a number of projects (mostly under international initiative) have attempted to remedy. See, *inter alia*, Boriani & Macchiarella (2009) and Boriani & Giambruno (2015).
- b) See the Charter of Venice (1964), arts. 9, 11, and 12 and subsequent Charters, Conventions and Declarations.
- c) This work was already envisaged in the report on the 2001 restoration project. It was also confirmed by the report on the 2018 restoration project.
- d) This work was envisaged in the report on the restoration project of 2018.
- e) *Ibidem*.
- f) According to testimonies from the inhabitants, the original icons were taken to Greece.

Conclusions

Valbona Flora, Kamela Guza

The conceptual, methodological and operational complexity of the work shown in the previous pages deserves a few conclusive words that aim to provide a brief summary of the salient features and to highlight some more general aspects that emerge after the work has been completed.

Each of the analysed sites has been read and interpreted from an interdisciplinary perspective that sought to bring forth the most relevant potentialities of each village, while contemporarily identifying the issues that could hinder their development.

In the villages of Përmet, the monumental heritage emerged with exceptional emphasis. In particular, the churches of Leusë and Kosinë together with the Katiu Bridge in Bënjë constitute a central core of the process of territorial analysis. The monumental architecture is here part of an evocative landscape and natural background, often accompanied by a built fabric of undeniable value. For instance, we could recall the presence of the “Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëllia” National Park, or the streets in *kalldrëm*, the traditional stone houses, the Canyon of the Lengarica River and the thermal area of Bënjë, which every year attract numerous Albanian and foreign tourists. Especially Bënjë occupies a privileged position compared to the other two villages, having been declared a protected ‘historic centre’ in 2016.

Also in Zvërnec, the issue of monumental architecture provided a stimulating research opportunity. The Church of the Dormition of Mary on the Island of Zvërnec – an already established tourist destination – offered the chance to reflect not only on the intrinsic value of the monument, but also on its relations with the villagers and the lagoon landscape. In Zvërnec, the study of the landscape was essential to the understanding of the *genius loci*. The Vjosë-Nartë Protected Area – a unique ecosystem of extraordinary biodiversity and habitat variety – is a key factor for the village’s desired tourism development.

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Razëm constitutes a special case from the point of view of the architectural heritage. Since here the Cultural Monuments (recognized by the State) are missing, the focus of the research was oriented towards an interesting residential complex of the beginning of the last century situated in the centre of the village. A first attempt has thus been made to investigate this completely unknown research topic, opening the way to further, more specific studies. However, the most evident qualities of Razëm – confirmed by the village's belonging to Shkrel Regional Park and to the future National Park of the Albanian Alps – lie in the extraordinary alpine landscape, rich in natural resources. The mountain hut settlements in the alpine pastures around the village form an unmistakable landscape configuration with specific features and an architectural language of its own. The alpine pastures testify to the everyday practices and relationships with the territory connected to the ancient tradition of transhumance and to the processing and production of dairy products of undoubted quality.

In all the villages, the richness of the intangible cultural heritage is highly distinctive. Even though a conspicuous part of the local traditions has slowly faded into oblivion, it was still possible to identify the most significant elements.

In Përmet, a first common thread that runs through the entire area is undoubtedly the musical tradition of the *tosk* iso-polyphony, declared to be part of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage in 2005. This tradition finds its most eminent representative in Laver Bariu, whose music still undisputedly excels today in local popular festivals. In addition, the area of Përmet is particularly renowned for its contribution to pedagogy and literary production (thanks to the presence of the Frashëri brothers), for its gastronomic tradition as well as for the artisanal weaving, embroidery and traditional garments and also the wood and stone working that reached their full maturity in the period between the 18th and 19th centuries.

In Zvërnec, instead, the presence of the Lagoon of Nartë on the one hand and the salt pans on the other, have led to a greater development of traditions related to fishing and salt production.

In Razëm, the *xhubleta* with its ancient roots plays an important role in the regional culture together with the rhapsodic tradition, which for centuries has contributed to spread the songs of the mountain epic narrating the resistance in the face of the expansionist Serbian threat.

These and other expressions of the cultural heritage have inspired the Guidelines' Intervention Strategies that aim at an integrated territorial enhancement.

Unfortunately, several issues hinder the regeneration of the villages and threaten their potential for social and tourism development.

The most impactful issues are attributable to the persistence of customs and behaviours that hold back social and economic progress (like, for instance, the influence in Northern Albania of the Customary Law of *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*), the abandonment of the agricultural land and traditions rooted in the peasant culture as well as the weakening of artisanal production, the degradation of the building heritage, the lack of effective policies in support of rural areas and the constant threat of choices that do not respect the delicate environmental balances, illegal building that undermines the authenticity of traditional architecture and the lack of infrastructure and basic public services. Many of these phenomena, as we know, are mainly caused by the constant emigration and consequent depopulation of the villages.

The Intervention Strategies have been structured through a series of specific Actions that aim to consolidate the identity of the villages analysed, to increase accessibility to local resources and enhance the attractiveness of the places through the perspective of an inclusive, enduring and sustainable tourism development. Hopefully this develop-

ment should take place also with the contribution of the villagers who have emigrated to other Albanian cities, or abroad.

A substantial part of the Guidelines Actions focuses on the landscape issues and represents an undoubted novelty for the Albanian context. Many of them aim to provide planning tools capable of managing the landscape in its entirety and at the same time recognising its intrinsic value. The substantive projects dealing with landscape enhancement aim at the creation of a *Digital Inventory of hiking and transhumance paths*, the construction of greenways and the redevelopment of specific contexts such as the thermal area in Bënjë, the open space surrounding the Church in Kosinë or the complex of the villas in Razëm. Particular attention has been given to the area of Zvërnec, significantly altered from an ecological point of view by the pollution caused by the industrial sites (operating or decommissioned) in the neighbouring area and also threatened by questionable urban planning forecasts. The environmental urgency, a clear obstacle to tourism development, requires first of all actions aimed at mitigating the health risks for the inhabitants. Among the Actions included in the Guidelines there are, in fact, proposals for the environmental remediation of the site where the former Uzina PVC plant was located, the elimination of illegal dumps and other environmental impact analyses.

Another issue we focused on concerns the conservation, reuse and redevelopment of the architectural and monumental heritage, with proposals that pay special attention to environmental and socio-cultural features, to the needs and requests of local communities, jointly addressing physical and social degradation. Indeed, in addition to the Cultural Monuments to which specific Actions that take into account their historical and constructive complexity are dedicated, the widespread building heritage has also been the subject of particular attention. In this case, we have proposed a coordinated set of actions aimed at the safeguard of the main features of traditional architecture and at the functional restoration and conversion of the built heritage in order to enhance the basic public services, tourism and artisanal activities. An Action worth mentioning is the regeneration of the historic centre of Bënjë through the creation of a dispersed hotel. This rather innovative solution for the Albanian context was proposed with the intention of triggering a virtuous circle that actively involves the local community and allows economic and tourism development based on the authentic resources available on the area.

A very important component of these Guidelines is the inclusion of local communities in the development processes. Numerous Actions are based on the involvement of the villagers in the protection, conservation and maintenance of public spaces, the creation of *Community Maps* and the regeneration of potentially valuable tangible and intangible assets that could contribute to the collective well-being. To this end, we have suggested the creation of community enterprises as an opportunity for the villagers to have an active role in decision-making processes. Community enterprises have been conceived as emancipating tools especially for women, unemployed young people and village elders who preserve the knowledge of the local culture.

The involvement of the villagers is particularly incisive in the Actions concerning the intangible heritage. Most of the attention, in this case, has been given to the promotion of experiential tourism with proposals related to the food heritage through the creation of an *Inventory of the gastronomic culture* – a specific tool for the storage of memories to be handed down to future generations – or through initiatives aimed at promoting tourism and rediscovering ancient traditions (for example, the creation of a *Local feasts calendar*).



The Katiu Bridge as a metaphor of “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

These Guidelines, constitute a tool for planning substantive actions in the area and a necessary step towards the creation of Local Development Plans and Territorial Marketing Plans.

In our view, the adopted methodology constitutes a ‘model’ that can be easily replicated in other rural contexts, not just in Albania. The versatile nature of this tool makes it accessible to local communities, institutions as well as to NGOs working in the area and also to scholars and researchers. More generally, we think that the Guidelines can interact with a wide range of people interested in establishing a more direct relationship with the places, more adherent to the vibrant resources of an environment still capable of transmitting values and experiences.

The book is an unprecedented scientific product among the studies and research related to the Albanian cultural heritage and its ability to be a driver for the socio-economic development of the country. All the components of the cultural heritage of the villages have been addressed and analysed here, trying to identify connections and exchanges between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, a complex but inevitable (as well as fascinating) process along the arduous path towards the knowledge of the places.

It would not have been possible to achieve this result without the commitment of Antonio Lauria who defined the methodology of the research project, the structure of the Guidelines and coordinated the implementation of the work with the collaboration of other University of Florence staff.

At the same time, a decisive role was also played by students, young scholars and professionals of the Albanian Diaspora in Italy (of which the authors of these Conclusions are part) that participated in the “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

Our presence in the working group has given this research a unique character. It was a sort of 'secret ingredient' capable of better interacting with the 'substances' of the places which we have long since left. This transfer of the knowledge (acquired on our educational and professional paths in Italy) towards the *mëmëdheu* (The "mother land", in Albanian) is tinged with a double meaning. It became a journey that occurred in two complementary directions and which requires here a brief personal interlude.

The first direction (the most obvious one) goes from Italy to Albania, towards the places we analysed and investigated which were mostly unknown to most of us before this research experience.

The second direction (the more unexpected one) was revealed during the stay in the villages and does no longer belong to the geographical space, but to the 'space' inside us. Our contact with the places, the people, the traditions, the landscape and the most representative buildings was capable of awakening ancient bonds suspended within us. The research then served as a catalyst for a process that had remained unfinished for us after leaving Albania in the first place. Despite the years of distance, we found ourselves essentially close to our origins and therefore able to put into dialogue the two worlds that inhabit us without having to give up any part of their identity. The result was thus an authentically 'anthropological journey' that adds value to the research experience documented in the pages of this book and embodies an essential condition for a real immersion in the mystery of places.

Annexes

ANNEX 1 – THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FORM

General information

Village

Date

Interviewee profile

Gender Male Female

Age

Nationality

Main occupation

Questions

-
1. Could you speak about the history of your family? Where does your family come from? Where were you born?
 2. Which religion do you belong to? Do you practice? How much do you feel connected to the religious doctrine?
 3. Could you speak about your everyday life, your relationship with the community and with the village? How has it changed in time?
 4. How often do you go to town and why? How do you usually go there? Is there a public transportation service? What is the duration of the journey?
 5. What is the role of public institutions in your life? Do they properly operate according to your needs?
 6. How do the health and educational services work?
 8. Which were/are the places where you met/meet in the village? Has your social life changed in time?
 9. What are the public buildings of the village (civil of religious) worth to you?
 10. Have you ever thought of leaving the village? If so, why? Where would you like to move to? What changes, according to you, could the migrated inhabitants bring to the village?
 11. Is the village visited by tourists? What are the things they most appreciate? According to you, what do they think about the village?
 12. Could you describe a memory, a custom, a recipe or anything belonging to the past (now lost), which you think would be important to recover?
 13. Which are the popular feasts and traditions of the village? Could you describe them?
 14. Which are the typical products and traditional dishes of the village? What has got lost in time?
 15. Could you describe a recipe from the local cuisine of the village?

Additional information and observations of the interviewer

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ANNEX 2 – THE ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY DATA SHEET

BUILDING SHEET no.

BUILDING CODE	DATE OF SURVEY	LOCATION

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

PLAN

1.1 ADDRESS AND GPS COORDINATES

1.2 AGE GROUP	<input type="checkbox"/> UP TO 1945	<input type="checkbox"/> 1945-1990	<input type="checkbox"/> AFTER 1990
---------------	-------------------------------------	------------------------------------	-------------------------------------

1.3 ORIENTATION LONGITUDINAL AXIS

1.4 ALTERATION TO EXISTING BUILDING	<input type="checkbox"/> BASIC RENOVATION Specify _____	<input type="checkbox"/> EXTENSIVE RENOVATION Specify _____
-------------------------------------	---	---

1.5 ACCESSIBILITY	EASY	PASSABLE	DIFFICULT
-------------------	------	----------	-----------

- PEDESTRIAN	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

- VEHICULAR	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
-------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

1.6 BUILDING OCCUPANCY	ORIGINAL	ACTUAL
------------------------	----------	--------

1.7 CURRENT USE	<input type="checkbox"/> INHABITED	<input type="checkbox"/> TEMPOR. INHABITED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNINHABITED
-----------------	---------------------------------------	---	---

2. TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES

2.1 CONFIGURATION ISOLATED GROUP CONTIGUOUS

RESIDENTIAL NON RESIDENTIAL

2.2 BUILDING TYPOLOGY

<input type="checkbox"/> FARM HOUSE	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURAL
<input type="checkbox"/> COURTYARD HOUSE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> TERRACED HOUSES	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> TERRACED HOUSE	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> TOWER HOUSE	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (specify) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (specify) _____

2.3 PROPERTY SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE
 MULTI-FAMILY HOUSE

2.4 No. OF STOREYS ABOVE GROUND BELOW GROUND

2.5 No. OF ROOMS

2.8 ROOMS

- ENTRANCE
- KITCHEN-LUNCH
- COMMON SPACE
- BEDROOM/S
- INDOOR BATHROOM
- OUTDOOR BATHROOM
- STABLE
- STOREROOM
- OTHER (specify) _____

2.9 COURTYARD NO
 YES (specify) _____

2.6 AGRICULTURAL ANNEXES NO
 YES (specify) _____

3. MATERIALS AND CONSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENTS

3.1 ENCLOSURE COURTYARD

3.2 RETAINING WALLS

3.3 FOUNDATION

3.4 VERTICAL LOAD-BEARING STRUCTURE

- EXTERIOR WALLS	Average Thickness
------------------	-------------------

- INTERIOR WALLS	Average Thickness
------------------	-------------------

3.5 DOOR OR WINDOW HEADS
(lintel, flat arch, relieving arch, etc.)

3.6 ARCHES AND VAULTED STRUCTURES

3.7 GROUND FLOOR

3.8 INTERMEDIATE FLOOR/S

3.9 FALSE CEILING

3.10 PAVINGS	-1 FLOOR	GROUND FLOOR	+1 FLOOR
--------------	----------	--------------	----------

3.11 ROOF

3.12 COVERING

3.13 INFILL WALLS

3.14 PARTITIONS

3.15 STAIRCASE/S

3.16 TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
(water, electrical, heating, waste water, etc.)

3.17 DOORS AND WINDOWS

3.18 OTHER (specify) _____

4. STATE OF CONSERVATION

4.1 SYNTHETIC ASSESSMENT OF THE BUILDING	<input type="checkbox"/> INHABITABLE	<input type="checkbox"/> NOT INHABIT.	<input type="checkbox"/> RUIN
4.1.1 ENCLOSURE COURTYARD	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.2 RETAINING WALLS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.3 FOUNDATION	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.4 VERTICAL LOAD-BEARING STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.5 DOOR OR WINDOW HEAD	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.6 ARCHES AND VAULTED STRUCTURES	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.7 GROUND FLOOR	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.8 INTERMEDIATE FLOOR/S	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.9 FALSE CEILING	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.10 PAVINGS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.11 ROOF	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.12 COVERING	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.13 INFILL WALLS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.14 PARTITIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.15 STAIRCASE/S	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.16 TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.17 DOORS AND WINDOWS	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.1.18 OTHER (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> POOR
4.2 MAIN DISEASES	<input type="checkbox"/> FOUNDATION ISSUES <input type="checkbox"/> WALL CRACKING AND BUILDING MOVEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> OUT-OF-PLUMB WALLS <input type="checkbox"/> CRACKS IN ARCHES AND VAULTED STRUCTURES <input type="checkbox"/> POOR CONNECTION BETWEEN STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED MORTAR JOINTS <input type="checkbox"/> DETACHMENT OF STONE ELEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> CORROSION OF STEEL ELEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATION OF WOODEN ELEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> CARBONATION IN REINFORCED CONCRETE ELEMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> RAIN INFILTRATION <input type="checkbox"/> CONDENSATION PHENOMENA <input type="checkbox"/> DRAINAGE PROBLEMS <input type="checkbox"/> RISING DAMP <input type="checkbox"/> CRACKING OR DETACHMENT OF PLASTER <input type="checkbox"/> EFFLORESCENCE <input type="checkbox"/> PLANT GROWTH <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (specify) _____		

5. SEISMIC VULNERABILITY

- 5.1 SOIL FEATURES
- SANDY
 - GRAVEL
 - CLAY
 - ROCKY
 - MIXED
 - OTHER (specify) _____
-

- 5.2 CRITICALITIES
- THRUSTING STRUCTURES (ARCHES, VAULTS OR RAFTERS WITHOUT TIE)
 - LACK OF BRACING STRUCTURES
 - REDUCED DISTANCE BETWEEN WINDOWS
 - OPENING NEAR THE CORNERS (< 100 cm DISTANCE)
 - LOW QUALITY MASONRY
 - DRYWALL
 - INACCURATE TOOTHING BETWEEN WALLS
 - WORKS THAT HAVE COMPROMISED THE LATERAL BUILDING RESISTANCE
 - OTHER (specify) _____
-

- 5.3 ANTI-SEISMIC SOLUTIONS
- CURBS OR HOOPINGS
 - TRUSSES
 - RING BEAM
 - TIE-BEAMS
 - WEDGES
 - BRACING WALLS
 - BUTTRESS
 - OTHER (specify) _____
-

6. SURVEY DRAWINGS AND PHOTOS

7. NOTES

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1.2 Traditions, Social Practices and Local Craftsmanship

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1.3 Landscape

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1.4.2 Kosinë

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1.5 Architectural Assets

1.5.1 *Katiu Bridge in Bënjë*

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II.4 Settlement and Buildings

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Part III ZVËRNEC

III.1 Food Heritage

<<https://tegraf.al/opinion-2/kush-po-e-shkaterron-faunen-e-lagunes-se-nartes/>>
 <<http://www.grossetonotizie.com/progetto-pesce-in-collina-magliano/>>

III.2 Traditions, Social Practices and Local Craftsmanship

<http://www.albanianhistory.net/1827_Manזור/index.html>
 <<https://erinadacinews.wordpress.com/2013/07/09/veshjet-popullore-vlonjate-resurs-per-zhvillimin-e-turizmit-kulturor/>>
 <<http://www.oranews.tv/article/peshkimi-i-paligjshem-ankohen-peshkaret-e-vlores-rrezikohet-zhdukja-e-rasatit>>
 <<http://www.nutrireterento.it/content/view/full/8400>>
 <<http://www.mjedisi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Kalendari-2019.pdf>>

III.3 Landscape

<<http://www.birdlife.org>>
 <<http://tourism.albinfo.al/>>
 <<http://datazone.birdlife.org/site/factsheet/narta-lagoon-iba-albania>>
 <<http://www.celim.it/it/progetto/conservazione-delle-aree-protette-in-albania/>>
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 <http://www.parcoaddasud.it/portale/pubblicazioni-menu/libri/item/download/15_535802d82146a4d346e8cf4c14f8f1f7.html>
 <http://www.parchilazio.it/documenti/pubblicazioni/125_allegato1.pdf>
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III.4 Settlement and Buildings

<<https://geoportal.asig.gov.al/map>>
 <<http://www.wbif.eu/project/PRJ-ALB-ENV-009>>
 <<https://smilealbania.gov.al/fshati-zvernec/>>
 <<https://vlora.gov.al/turizem/informacion-per-vizitoret/>>
 <<http://www.gruppo.acea.it/al-servizio-delle-persone/acqua/le-case-dellacqua>>

III.5 Architectural Asset

<https://orthodoxalbania.org/2020/2020/05/20/vijojne-punimet-per-restaurimin-e-kishes-se-manastirit-te-fjetjes-se-hyllindeses-ne-ishullin-e-zvernecit/?fbclid=IwAR2wC9WcKacb5EW211Ffbo3i5H7Xtxwwu_lvf8tKH7dnolNDg6LUI SZOVFY>

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Five Albanian Villages. Guidelines for a Sustainable Tourism Development through the Enhancement of the Cultural Heritage.

This book is the result of a research project designed and carried out at the Department of Architecture, University of Florence. This research was based on the transfer of knowledge from members of the Albanian Diaspora in Italy (university students, young architects and researchers) to their home country. This unique process blazed a trail in the Albania-related studies by creating a methodology, which could be replicated not only in Albanian rural contexts, but also elsewhere.

The book constitutes a structured tool for generating sustainable and socially inclusive territorial development processes in five lesser-known Albanian cultural sites. Their tangible and intangible cultural heritage was seen as a driving factor for triggering development processes aimed at improving the inhabitants' quality of life and strengthening local identity and social networks.

Through concrete proposals and strategies, the book offers scenarios and solutions capable of enhancing the potential of each village and, at the same time, counteracting the effects of land abandonment that so often characterise them.

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