

ALBANIA

Monasteries of Albania, Abandoned Monuments. Key Study on a Survey and Documentation Initiative

Introduction

Most of the existing monasteries, mainly located in central and southern Albania, date back to the post-Byzantine period (16th–19th centuries)¹. Historical records reveal that many of them were founded in earlier times,² but the buildings preserved nowadays belong to post-Byzantine times, as a result of the ongoing reconstructions. The basis for these conclusions has also been the recordings of various western travellers, who testified to ruins mainly in villages after the stabilisation of the “Pax Ottomanica”³.

Monasteries were founded in the countryside and in mountainous areas, and, especially during the first period of the Ottoman occupation, along the communication routes.⁴ They were built in dominant places as well as in the most protected and picturesque spots (Fig. 1). The defensive character is a feature of the monasteries, which in the first period was more pronounced. They were surrounded by high walls (Fig. 2) and equipped with turrets and sometimes with guard towers. Over time this defensive characteristic abated.⁵

Constructions inside the monastery complex have different functions; the following can be mentioned: the church, the dining room, facilities for administrative and clergy accommodation, guest houses or places of worship for believers, facilities for servants and the monastery, as well as auxiliary facilities, livestock barn, pantry⁶ etc.

Water supply was always a concern for monastic life. The water was provided by wells or *sterols* (water cisterns) which



Fig. 1: St. Mary of Driano monastery



Fig. 2: Surrounding walls of the monastery of St. Mary of Driano

collected rainwater through gutters from the roofs of buildings. Often *sterols* were treated with particular architectural care. An example is the case of the Vanishta monastery *sterol* (Fig. 3), built in the form of a high tower.⁷

Protection status

A considerable part of the monasteries in Albania are protected by obtaining the status of cultural monument of Category I and thus being included in the list of monuments by a joint decision in 1963.⁸ By this order, the Tirana State University Rectorate placed under state protection a long list of religious monuments for each district of the country, including all typologies that were of cultural or historical value for the country. Only Christian monuments in central and southern Albania were counted: 21 churches in Berat, six churches and one monastery in Ersekë, five churches and three monasteries in Fier, 19 churches and 14 monasteries in Gjirokastra, 27 churches and one monastery in Korça, five churches and one monastery in Lushnja, 20 churches and eight monasteries in Saranda, 12 churches and three monasteries in Vlora.

Cultural revolution

In 1967 Albania proclaimed itself to be the only atheist country in the world. In February 1967 the leader of that time, Enver Hoxha, delivered a speech entitled “Further Revolutionizing the Party and the Power”. Immediately afterwards, the only journal of the time, *The Voice of the People*, published the article: “With the sharp sword of party ideology, against religious ideology, prejudice, superstition and backward customs”. This caused great damage to the monuments of religious heritage, leading to the de-



Fig. 3: The water cistern of the monastery of the Annunciation to the Virgin in Vanishta



Fig. 4: Students from the Department of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage

Nr_i_skedes			
Emertimi	Kisha e Shen Merise	Pershkrimi_arkitekturik	Kisha perbehet nga naocat narteksa dhe hajati. Kisha eshte njenefeshe me kupole. Permasat e brendshme jane 7.90x4.80m. Ne muret veriore dhe jugore dalin dy cifte pilastrash te lidhura mes tyre me harqe te citat e ndajne hapësiren ne tri pjese. Pjesa qendrore eshte me e madhe, ne forme katrore dhe eshte e mbuluar me kupole. Aboida gjysmeqendrore nga brenda dhe nga jashte. Keta ka shtate harqe mbi pilastra ne relie. Mund te konsiderohet edhe shtatesqeshe.
Fosha	Arktekture	Pershkrimi_konstruktiv	Muraturë guri. Pjesa qendrore mbulohet me kupole qe mbesheter ne kater pilastra ngjitur me muret gjatesore. Senktuar dhe pjesa perendimore mbulohen me qemere cilindrike me perbuesen vert - Jug. Narteks: dhe hajati jane me çali druri. Narteks: eshte tre kambe shtatë mbi pjeset e tjera.
Gjinia	Kisha		Çatia katerfaqeshe, ndërsa ne jug vazhdon dhe mbulon edhe hajatin. Hajati ka mbeshetje me shtylla druri (9 te blla).
Tipologjia	Njenefeshe me kupote		Çatia e hajalit mbahet me puntela, eshte ne gjendje te keqe.
Kodi_arkivit			P. Thome, Kisha! pastbizantline ne Shqipërisen e Jugut, Tiranë 1998.
Adresa	Vitikuq, ne hyrje te fshatit ne te djathte te		
Rrethi	---		
Bashkia	Korçë (KO)		
Komuna	---		
Fshati	Vitikuq		
Status_i_mbrojtjes	Kategoria I		
Nr_vendimit_dj_shpallje	6/15.01.1963		
Institucioni_shpalljes	Rektorati i Universitetit Shtetëror te Tiranës.		
Datimi	gjysma II e shek. XVI		
Inst_Administratues_drirk	DRRCK Korçë		
Perdorimi_milestar	Kisha		
Perdorimi_i_tanishem	Kisha		
A_ka_rrethim_gjendja_e_tij	Rrethim me mur te ulët guri. Ky e ndan		
Zona_e_mbrojtur			
Koordinatat_e_monumentit			
Koordinatat_e_zones_se_mbrojtur	A:40.524044 E:20.920500 S:40.524044 C:40.524100		
Pronesia	Shtetërore		
Emri_pronant			
Nr_pronesise			
Zona_kadastrale			
Sip_e_nderimit_lartësia_obj	210m ² / 7,5 m		
Sipe_e_perqije_rrethimit	576m ²		
Sipe_e_zones_se_mbrojtur	4445 m ²		
Aksesit	Rrugë e paasfaltuar ne pjesen fundore		
Pershkrimi_piktures_murale			
Çatia_mbuluese	Çati katerqeshe me masa guri. Eshte ne		
Dyert_dritare	Dritare te demtuara ne veri.		
Tavani_nderkati	---		
Struktura_drur_ne_amb_brend			
Meraturia	mur guri lidhur me llaç. Aboida eshte me		

Fig. 5: Template for the inventourisation of monuments in FileMaker programme

struction of a large number of icons, frescoes, religious books and so on. Due to their location in dominant areas, most monasteries were converted into military bases. Moreover, many churches and monasteries were removed from the list of protected monuments. Berati numbered 15, Elbasani eleven, Durresi five, Erseka four, Fieri four, Gjirokastra 25, Korca 27, Kruja two, Peshkopia two, Pogradeci five, Permeti seven, Saranda 22, Shkodra three, Tirana two, Tropoja three, and Vlora 17.

There was a contradiction in the following years, because on the one hand there was a fight over the churches and other religious buildings; and on the other hand, a large number of churches were put under state protection, namely in 1970, 1977, 1980, and 1983.

After 1991, with the political changes, the state policy towards religious heritage changed immediately, although the damage to religious culture heritage buildings had suffered a powerful shock.

Monasteries at the beginning of the 21th century

Monasteries today are centres that have not retained their function, as their monastic life has for the most part been extinct

since the beginning of the last century. In these complexes today only the church has been preserved, while the *konak-s* are mostly uninhabited and consequently damaged.⁹ Therefore, the documentation of the monasteries is considered a priority step. For this purpose, ICOMOS Albania has undertaken a documentation initiative, thanks to a project that has also been supported by the Ministry of Culture, Institute of Cultural Monuments, and made possible by the US Ambassador's Cultural Heritage Fund.¹⁰

The project that started two years ago deals with documenting (214) churches and monasteries that hold the status of "cultural monument" and are located throughout Albania. For a better organisation of the field work, we considered it appropriate to include a team of experts from various professional fields: GIS specialists, architect conservators, archaeologists, and art conservators. The survey team also includes three students from the Department of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage assisting with the field training. Also, this will help them to become familiar with the religious heritage of the country through first-hand observation and field work.

In particular, the project will provide them with personal knowledge and experience, thus enlarging the knowledge of the

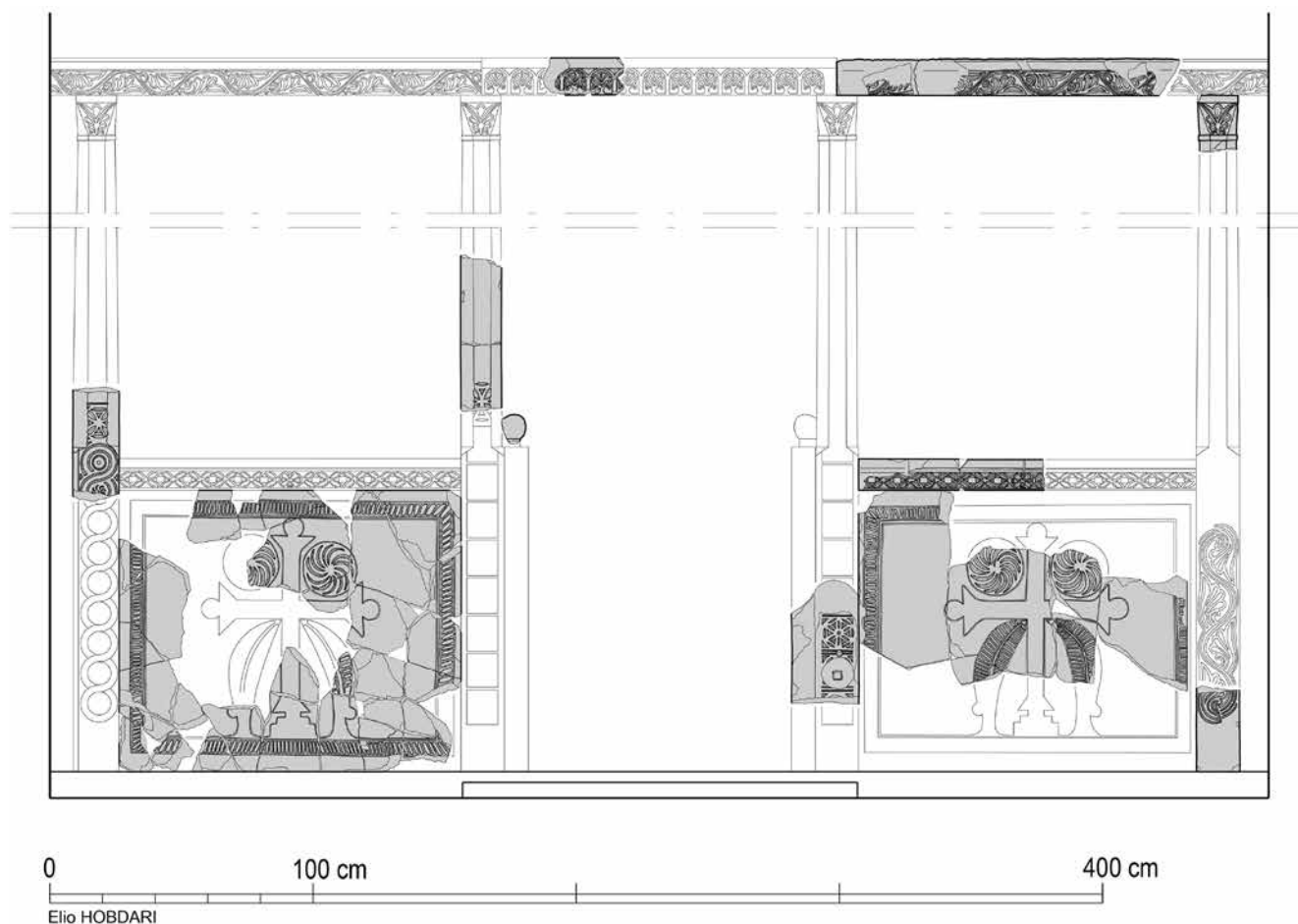


Fig. 6: Graphic documentation of the iconostasis at St. John's church

state of conservation of the materials in the historic buildings. The student groups will change with each trip in order to give all of them the opportunity of first-hand experience (Fig. 4).

The in-depth information will be accessible to all Albanian institutions of cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture, Centre for Cultural Heritage Inventory, National Institute of Cultural Monuments, and the Regional Directorates of Cultural Monuments) and will allow them to develop a national and comprehensive strategy of conservation, including setting preservation and conservation priorities.

Likewise, each site visit involves the participation of a GIS specialist who is responsible for taking detailed coordinate data, developing the coordinates on a GIS mapping system using the Vector GIS Capabilities, transferring data, and training a specialist from the Institute of Cultural Monuments during the project time.

The project aims to carry out a detailed photographic documentation, drawings, as well as other types of documentation regarding problems of deterioration, providing a report and fulfilling a schedule for every single monument in FileMaker, one for the building and the other for the mural art and other types of decoration (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

The assembled materials for each site produced during the project will be deposited at the archives of the Institute of Cultural Monuments, and at the archives of the Regional Directorates of National Culture in six cities all over Albania, and another copy will be deposited at the National Centre for the Registration of Cultural Property. This comprehensive collection of technical files will constitute the entire survey. A 3D modelling solution has aimed at creating professional quality 3D content from still images by using Agisoft Metashape. At the end of the project, a catalogue will be developed in order to reflect all the work done on site.

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Footnotes

- ¹ For inscriptions and dates see the publication: Popa, Th., *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri, Akademia e Shkencave, Tiranë, 1998.*
- ² Thomo, P., *Manastiret e krahinave të Gjirokastrës, Tiranë, Monumentet, 53/2015, fq. 147.*
- ³ Kiel, M., *Art and Society of Bulgaria in the Turkish Period; Van Gorcum, Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands.; 1985; fq. 171.*
- ⁴ Thomo, P., *Manastiret e krahinave të Gjirokastrës, Tiranë, Monumentet, 53/2015, fq. 147; see also Giakoumis, K., The Monasteries of Jorgucat and Vanishtë in Dropull and of Spelαιο in Lunxhëri as Monuments and Institutions during the Ottoman Period in Albania (16th–19th Centuries), Ph.D. thesis submitted in the C. B. O. M. G. S., The University of Birmingham, Birmingham 2002, fq. 125; and Adami J., *Rrugë dhe objekte arkeologjike në Shqipëri, Shtypshkronja e re, Tiranë, 1983.**
- ⁵ Thomo, P., *Manastiret e krahinave të Gjirokastrës, Tiranë, Monumentet, 53/2015, fq. 147; Meksi, Aleksandër - Thomo, P., Arkitektura pasbizantine në Shqipëri – Bazilikat, Monumentet, Tiranë, 1981/21.*
- ⁶ Thomo, P., *Manastiret, Tiranë, Monumentet, 2015/53, fq. 14; see also: Giakoumis, Giorgio, Monuments of Orthodoxy in Albania, (Mnimia Orthodoxias stin Alvania) Athina, 1994; Thomo, P., “Kisha Pasbizantine në Shqipërinë e Jugut”, KOASH, Tiranë, 1998.*
- ⁷ *Historia e Arkitekturës në Shqipëri, Tiranë 2016, fq. 595.*
- ⁸ Most churches and monastery complexes in central and southern Albania have been put under the protection of the Rectorate of the State University of Tirana, by joint decision No.6 of January 15, 1963.
- ⁹ Thomo, P., *Monumentet, Shqipëria i ka humbur të gjitha manastiret; Pressreader, Janar, 19, 2013; <https://www.pressreader.com/albania/gazeta-shqiptare/20130119/281960310113693>.*
- ¹⁰ AFCP (Tirana) <https://al.usembassy.gov/education-culture/educational-exchange-programs/ambassadors-fund-cultural-preservation-afcp/>

Credits

Figs. 1–5: © Edlira Çaushti

Fig. 6: © Elio Hobdari