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HERITAGE IS OUR BRAND

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About the Publication

The project *"Heritage is Our Brand!"* has been conceived as an inclusive initiative aimed at raising awareness and engaging younger generations in the safeguarding and promotion of Albania's intangible cultural heritage. At its heart, it represents more than a cultural initiative—it is a sustainable investment in nurturing the Albanian spirit and identity, offering a platform that reconnects young generations with their cultural roots.

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The organization DMO Albania, in partnership with EU Policy Hub and with the financial support of the European Union, conceived and implemented the project *"Heritage is Our Brand!"* at a time of great urgency for the country—when values of Albania's cultural and identity heritage are fading under the impact of many factors, notably three decades defined by massive migratory movements, advances in technology, a trend of decline in reading, the lack of intergenerational dialogue, the absence of quality education allotting due focus on identity, as also the erosion of community life. The project arose in response to the pressing need to rekindle young Albanians' pride in the precious intangible cultural heritage passed down to the present day by their ancestors. For the team taking up this initiative, "Heritage is Our Brand!" represents was not merely another project but indeed a mission—to not only promote authentic Albanian values through storytelling, but also to inspire creativity among young artists and support the production of few artistic works informed by and engaging with those values.

At its core, the project involved collecting and retelling selected stories representing outstanding instances of Albanian heritage—spanning mythology from antiquity, traditional rites, medieval and modern narratives. A team of experts engaged in the project's framework revived some of the most beautiful tales from different historical periods, by presenting them in an accessible, artistic style for younger generations and the wider community. These stories were in follow-up presented to young artists through a call for small grants, inviting them to transform the material into contemporary artworks—including films, animations, graphic novels, documentaries, performances, installations, bas-reliefs, and diverse other genres of artistic expression.

The team's heartfelt wish is that the present publication does not remain confined to library shelves, but that it reaches a wide audience and that it serves as an inspiration for at least fifteen artworks that give voice and resonate with Albanian intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, the project's envisioned forums with secondary-school literature and history teachers aim at providing them with stories and artistic products that be used to enrich extracurricular learning and youngster's school performances.

The project's title succinctly conveys our central message: Heritage is our wealth! Albanian heritage is the best brand for presenting ourselves to the world. Albania remains largely unexplored and its story insufficiently told to international audiences —importantly owing to the decades of communist isolation and the country's prolonged post-1990 transition period. Through this project initiative, we are persuaded that we partake in laying a cornerstone for the promotion of the enduring values of the Albanian nation — one of the oldest peoples in the Balkans which has preserved a living heritage of the memory and wisdom of grandparents and generations across centuries by passing down the language and a lore customs, traditions, rituals, folktales and legends. It is our persuasion that civil society is to engaged through such projects in order to ensure that this wealth does not disappear but that it continues to live and be transmitted from generation to generation.

Contents:

Introduction

The project *"Heritage is Our Brand"* is a inclusive and thorough initiative that seeks to safeguard and promote Albania's intangible cultural heritage, by way of connecting this heritage to the richness and diversity of the identity cherished by the Albanian people. This project is geared towards engaging younger generations — as well as individuals from all walks of life — in protecting and preserving heritage which has been passed down from generation to generation through stories, legends and traditions that shape Albania's vibrant culture. Stories gathered within the project's framework reflect the many facets of Albanian history and culture and highlight their profound connections with nature, mythology, morality, and social values.

Within this framework, Albanian cultural heritage can be seen through several key dimensions:

- Deep connections with history and national identity;
- Mythological heritage and bonds with nature;
- Folk traditions and popular beliefs;
- Heritage of sanctity and historical memory;
- Legends carrying moral and social values.

"Heritage is Our Brand!" strived to create exceptional opportunities for drawing of focused attention to the outstanding richness of Albania's cultural heritage and to raise awareness on its multi-faceted significance, while emphasizing its vital role for the safeguarding of national and spiritual identity. Albanian cultural heritage —encompassing not only the lore and wealth of stories and legends but also the very Albanian language itself — stands as a fundamental pillar of the Albanian nation in Albania and diaspora abroad. The Albanian language as prime heritage represents not merely a means of communication to-the-day, but it also stands as a powerful symbol of identity, unity and enduring continuity of Albanian culture across centuries.

These stories and legends offer us the opportunity to rediscover and renew values, beliefs and traditions representing the very foundations of Albanian identity and through their continued their story-telling they live on through future generations. As the vessel for these messages and values, the Albanian language represents a vital force that connects generations through the precious wealth of expressions and words representing receptacles of the history and soul of the Albanian people. The safeguarding the language is integral to the safeguarding cultural heritage at large, for language keeps alive our connection with the

past and enables the very transmission of this heritage to future generations. These stories are far more than remnants of the past. They comprise profound spiritual and cultural riches which give meaning and purpose to lives and values of Albanians. These stories represent a kind of mirror bearing witness to the history of strength and resilience of the Albanian people, who preserved with faith and pride their heritage in the face of precarious periods of history. The Albanian language is the glue that binds these stories and legends together, preserving the treasures of thought, philosophy and art of a nation which has forged a rich and distinctive culture.

In this context, "Heritage Is Our Brand!" creates a meaningful bridge between the past and the contemporary and help us understand that cultural heritage is not a mere collection of past events, but an active and vital element shaping and guiding our lives in the present. By promoting and safeguarding cultural heritage treasures, the project offers younger generations the opportunity to understand and respect their roots, while contributing to the nurturing of a healthy and enduring sense of identity.

These stories reflect messages of values and beliefs handed down across centuries as a precious treasure that must not be lost. They serve as a bridge among generations by virtue of being a living form of heritage from the past and they represent a meaningful dimension serving the building of a sustainable and culturally enriched future. Beyond the premise that the safeguarding of heritage is a civic duty on its own, it is in place to note that its safeguarding offers opportunities for Albanians which ensure that the nation's history and values remain alive, guiding future generations along the shared path of development and reinforcement of social fabric.

Methodology

The project aimed at providing a rich and comprehensible overview of Albania's intangible cultural heritage. By drawing upon legends and folk narratives, the project enabled a strong connection between the past and the present. Legends represent creations of popular imagination and are imbued with powerful messages, conveying enduring and healthy values closely tied to the life experiences and sentiments of Albanian society. Each of the selected stories has been approached not merely as a myth, but as a cultural asset carrying direct relevance and deep meanings for local communities and society at large.

With a view to the above, the methodology adopted connects each story to a specific historical and social

context, recognizing that every legend emerged under distinct circumstances and influences shaped by particular historical periods. Thus, each story has been examined with reference to relevant literature and scholarly studies concerning related events and epochs, allowing for a clear and thorough contextualization of the narratives presented.

Of selfsame importance to the methodological approach is the inclusion of the perspective on legends and folk tales are as no mere simple stories, but as profound reflections of the society engendering them as ways to express its identity, language, customs, hopes and beliefs. Furthermore, legends and folktales also serve as vehicles for preserving and transmitting powerful messages across generations — messages that help shape identity and nurture cultural heritage.

In order to provide a presentation as accurate and consistent as possible, explanations were complemented with references to historical sources and other forms of evidence offering a deeper understanding of the historical periods giving rise to each story. By virtue of such approach, the compilation of these legends and folk tales rests upon a credible and careful foundations, preserving the spirit of popular traditions, characterized by imposing simplicity and oftentimes leaving room for imagination.

It is due underscoring that these legends are not only reflections of history, but also forms of expressing the beliefs, morals and emotions of the people of their time. Though containing imaginative elements, they remain closely connected with real events and circumstances which profoundly influenced Illyrian and later Albanian culture and society at large. This approach makes it possible that legends and tales unfold and understood in their context as rich narratives, informed by the context defining their respective eras.

The preparation of this compilation of stories aimed at offering a portrait of Albanian cultural heritage and thereby also encouraging a deep reflection on values they convey. The messages they carry are strong and enduring, exerting a direct influence on the formation of the mentality and traditions of the Albanian society — and ever meaningful and relevant for younger generations.

This publication serves as an opportunity to link Albanian cultural heritage with pertinent historical and social contexts, based on reliable references and sources. In so doing, it grants legends and folk tales a renewed and deepened connection with today's realities and addresses the pressing need for their safeguarding as invaluable cultural assets.

Each selected story features a clear and coherent structure, comprising several key elements to ensure a comprehensive, in-depth and reliable presentation. The compilation process was designed so that each

story presented was approached in view of the ensuing steps and principles and guaranteeing a clear and credible portrayal, as follows:

- **Preparation of an in-depth historical review:** Before compiling the presentation of each story or event, thorough research was conducted on the pertinent historical period, including scholarly studies and reliable sources. This groundwork served to create a solid and well-founded context for each event.
- **Selection of relevant sources and documentation:** Each story is supported by written records, oral heritage testimonies and academic literature, in view of ensuring that events are addressed accurately and in a well-documented manner.
- **Interlinking a legend to historical developments:** Each story has been treated with care to establish clear connections between the narrative and its historical period. This step is essential to understanding how legends took shape at a given time and how they reflected the society of their era.
- **Contextualization of the event and its message:** Following the description of each event, an analysis was carried out on the message it conveys and its significance in today's context. This has ensured that the stories are not presented merely as accounts of the past but are connected to values and norms that continue to hold relevance for the Albanian society.
- **Use of a clear and accessible style to reach a broad audience:** Although entries for each story are grounded in research and historical sources, they have been presented in language that is simple and comprehensible to non-specialized readers, making them accessible for diverse audiences. Thus, each story has been compiled based on a careful and balanced methodology with a view to maintaining a strong connection to the past while at the same time accessible and opening up depths of understanding for contemporary readers.

The arrangement of the selected stories is based on a chronological principle, presenting accordingly developments of pertinent historical events and periods. However, it is due to underline that such chronological presentation bears any implication on the greater or lesser salience of a story compared to another. Each story, whether from early on or else as of recent, holds its own distinct significance and value — conveying important messages and contributing to the broader understanding of Albanian cultural heritage and identity. The hope of the Authors is that the approach espoused shall provide readers with a natural and coherent guide, allowing them to follow the flow of stories and legends within a complete and balanced context.

Teuta, Queen of the Seas

That day, the wind struck fiercely against the shores of the ancient Adriatic. Ships rocked in the harbor—some heavy with the spoils of war on their return, others ready to carry new warriors toward distant coasts. The king had died, and the council of elders decided: Teuta, his widow, would rule the state! Teuta, with trembling fingers, touched the cold crown resting on her head. It was Agron's crown — heavy, it seemed, a burden entrusted to her. She glanced toward little Pinnes, laughing and playing with the wind. It was a quiet moment, strange and still — like the calm before a storm. Then, the doors opened, and the messenger entered.

— Your Majesty, a delegation from Rome requests an audience. They say they bring words of peace...

Peace. How meaningless that word sounded.

Teuta's fleet was both her sword and her armor. She had empowered her sea captains to strike at anyone daring to challenge Illyrian supremacy. Some called them pirates. Teuta called them defenders of the kingdom. Yet power always carried a price.

Though the Roman envoys arrived bearing white flags, their language was harsh, their faces drawn tight with arrogance. One of them, Lucius Coruncanius, dared to interrupt her speech. He threatened her, reminding her that she had offended Rome — and would suffer the consequences.

Teuta said nothing. Silence, in her court, was a judgment heavier than any threat.

The ambassadors left the fortress convinced they had left behind a frightened woman. Yet near the courtyard by the harbor, something happened. Only one of them ever returned to Rome. Some said the sea found his body cast upon the rocks, his gaze still fixed toward the fortress. Others claimed the body was never found — as if the sea itself had swallowed him, an ancient vengeance for the insult dealt to a queen who bowed to no one.

Rome would remember that silence.

The Roman Senate declared war: in 229 BCE, Roman fleets landed on Illyrian shores with a force those lands had never before witnessed. It was the beginning of the First Illyrian—Roman War. Teuta fought with all her might, striving to keep her kingdom and allies united against the storm rising from the West. But this

time, the waves of history were greater than those of the sea.

Surrounded and without support, Teuta was forced to surrender. The Illyrians lost their territories and their freedom — but not her memory, nor her name. Teuta is the woman who defied an empire — the queen who entered history, remembered still after centuries beyond count.

Historical period: 3rd century BCE

Historical overview of the period

Teuta was queen of the Illyrians of the Ardiaean tribe, widow of King Agron, and ruled for several years at the end of the 3rd century BCE (230—227). After Agron's death, she assumed the leadership of the Illyrian state as regent for Agron's young son, Pinnes, from his marriage to Triteuta (*Polyb*. *Historiai*, II).

During her reign, Teuta openly challenged the growing power of the Roman Republic, supporting maritime expeditions and acts of piracy that led to the first military clash between Illyria and Rome — the First Illyrian—Roman War. Although ultimately forced to surrender and accept harsh terms imposed by Rome, historical memory records her as a powerful female figure and a warrior unyielding to her enemies.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

Teuta, queen of the Illyrians, represents one of the most powerful historical figures to have become mythologized by popular memory, especially along the coastal regions of the Adriatic. Her representations cross the boundary between history and legend, transforming a real historical character into a symbol of female strength and resistance against foreign domination. In Albanian oral tradition and collective memory, particularly in the regions of Shkodra, Rrjolli, Karaburun, and Himara, Teuta's figure has been invested with mythical dimensions: a protective *Ora*, a punisher of the unjust and an enduring inspiration for resistance.

Message

This story recounts the courage of a woman who, faced with a power as vast as Rome, chose not to bow down, notwithstanding the possibility of defeat. She defended the sovereignty and honor of her people with determination, using silence as her weapon and gesture as her political stance. Teuta lost the battle with Rome but gained her enduring place in historical memory as a symbol of courage and dignity.

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Antigonea, the City of Love and Sorrow

Long ago, in the deep heart of Epirus, amidst towering mountains and graceful winding valleys, there lived a young prince and warrior named Pyrrhus. After spending his early childhood at the court of Glaukias, king of the Taulantii, Pyrrhus set out for Alexandria — the city of learning and power. There, in the grandeur of King Ptolemy's royal court, he met Antigone, daughter of Queen Berenice — a woman who would change the course of his life. She was unlike any woman he had known before. Antigone spoke with the strength of reason and the gaze of wisdom. She knew the language of books and of stars. She had walked beside philosophers and stood among poets.

Pyrrhus, a warrior hardened by many battles, fell silent in front of the poetry of her soul. When he asked for her hand, she entrusted her heart to his. Together they returned to Epirus, and Pyrrhus was crowned king. Though in love, Pyrrhus had been born for war. Antigone remained by his side through every campaign. She was his peace.

To eternalize his love for her, Pyrrhus decided to found a city in her honor, on the highest hill rising above the valley of the Drinos. The city grew day by day, as did the child she carried within her. One morning, before the mist had lifted, Antigone felt that the moment had come. Pyrrhus — who had faced death a hundred times — trembled like a child before the life that was about to be born. Alas the gods had woven a dark fate. Antigone could not survive the birth and died did she giving life to their son.

Ptolemy the Younger grew up in the streets of Antigonea, among the stones that still held the warmth of his mother's hands. The city breathed with her spirit — a spirit of love for these distant lands that she had called home. Every square, every wall seemed to whisper her name.

He never knew his mother Antigone, but he saw her in dreams, he felt her presence in the breeze that caressed the hills, in the cool shade of the oaks rising by the city gates, in the songs of maidens when spring returned, and in the love with which she had built an entire city for him — before departing forever.

The city, born of love and sorrow, became an oasis of knowledge and wisdom, just as she would have wished. Today, the ruins of Antigonea still stand silent — yet not cold. They stand as a memory of a love not broken by death, but elevated through it.

Historical period: 3rd century BCE

Historical overview of the period

The ruins of the ancient city of Antigonea stand atop the ridge of Jerma Hill, southwest of the village of Saraqinisht, about 7 km east of Gjirokastra. It was the center of the Drino River basin. Antigonea, founded during the reign of Pyrrhus (297–295 BCE), the renowned king of Epirus, bears the name of his first wife, Antigone, adopted daughter of King Ptolemy I of Egypt. According to Stephanus of Byzantium (entry *Αντιγόνεια*), the city belonged to the region of ancient Chaonia, at a strategic point controlling the natural passes of the Drino valley between Epirus and Illyria.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The city's name, *Antigonea*, is testimony to Pyrrhus's devotion to Antigone and to the important alliance forged through his marriage to the Ptolemaic dynasty (*Plutarch, Pyrrhus*). It was thanks to this alliance that he regained the throne of Epirus (*Pausanias* 1.11.5). Pyrrhus and Antigone had two children: a daughter, Olympias, and a son, Ptolemy Pyrrhus (or simply *Ptolemy*), named in honor of his maternal grandfather, Ptolemy I Soter, founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. Historical sources record that Antigone did not survive childbirth. It is believed that, in memory of his first wife, Pyrrhus founded the city of Antigonea.

Message

This story conveys a deeply human message, touching upon the many dimensions of love — that between a man and a woman and that of the sublime bond between a mother and her child. Antigonea also symbolizes the human confrontation with pain and loss, while reflecting a strategic alliance between Egypt and Epirus, two major powers of their time. The founding of the city was at once an act of love, remembrance and diplomacy. Love and memory may find cities — but they become living heritage only when vision, politics and history intertwine.

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An Illyrian Tale: King Gentius and the Discovery of the Wonder-Flower

"Come, children… it's bedtime!"… "Grandfather, please, tell us once more the story of King Gentius and the magic flower he discovered!"

Along the steep shores of the Lake of the Labeates, among mountains that silently guard the memories of centuries, ruled Gentius — son of Pleuratus and last king of the Illyrians. When he received the crown from his father, the kingdom was surrounded by enemies. Across the Adriatic, the Romans had begun their march, conquering one by one the neighboring lands, like waves striking mercilessly against the coast. But Gentius, proud and unyielding, refused to submit. His army was brave, his fleet formidable. The Liburnian ships, light and swift, cut through the sea like arrows, striking suddenly and leaving behind only the echo of Illyrian valor.

Gentius was a wise ruler who valued knowledge as much as the sword. He loved nature and often told his warriors: "A battle is won first with a clear mind and a healthy body — only then with weapons."

One day, while walking along a rugged path, he noticed an unusual flower, with petals gleaming like the rays of the sun, growing alone among the rocks. The king knelt to observe it and, at that moment, felt that was no ordinary flower. It was the right one. From its roots, a healing ointment was prepared that miraculously cured the wounds of soldiers in the bloody battles against Rome. Soon its fame spread beyond the Illyrian lands. People called it *"The King's Flower"*, but in time, the world came to know it by another name — *Gentiana*.

After Gentius died in exile and Rome finally conquered Illyria, the *Gentiana* continued to bloom in the high mountain pastures, where the air is pure and the earth still holds the traces of ancestors. The flower became the king's gift to the world — a living memory of an age when Illyria stood proud, a symbol of Gentius's wisdom and love for his land and people. Each time the gentianas blossom and paint the mountain slopes, a soft breeze descends… whispering the still enduring glory of Gentius.

> *The grandfather rose slowly. With trembling hands, he tucked the children under their blankets. They were already dreaming… brave and warrior-like Liburn sailing under the moonlight, while Gentiana floated from mountain to mountain, healing the wounds of those who fought for their homeland.*

Historical Period: 2nd century BCE

Historical Overview

Gentius, son of Pleuratus II, was the last king of the Illyrian kingdom of the Labeates, reigning approximately between 181 and 168 BCE, during one of the most turbulent periods of Illyrian history. At that time, Illyria was caught between two expanding powers, viz. Rome and Macedonia.

King Gentius is remembered for his efforts to preserve Illyrian independence while the Roman Republic was extending its influence across the Balkans. During the Third Macedonian War (171—168 BCE), he allied with Perseus, the king of Macedonia, and declared war on Rome. The alliance failed, and Gentius's army was defeated by the Romans near Shkodra, the capital of the Labeates.

Archaeological evidence from his reign, including coins minted in Shkodra and Lissus (Lezha) bearing his name and portrait, testifies to a flourishing Illyrian state and its sophisticated political and economic organization.

Context of the Legend

Written sources highlight King Gentius as a patron of knowledge, science, and particularly medicine and botany. In *Naturalis Historia* (Book 25.34), Pliny the Elder credits Gentius as the first to identify and use the healing properties of the root of the plant later named *Gentiana lutea* — the great yellow gentian — in his honor.

Message

King Gentius, the last monarch of the Illyrians, embodies the resistance of an ancient people against the expansion of the Roman Republic — a civilization that would later shape the whole of the Western world. Yet beyond military valor, his story conveys a deeper legacy: a bond between wisdom, nature and resilience. His discovery of the *Gentiana* plant intertwines history and legend, symbolizing the harmony between human knowledge and the healing power of the earth. In cultural memory, Gentius endures not only as a ruler and warrior but as a guardian of Illyrian wisdom, a timeless reminder that the true strength of a people lies as much in their spirit and knowledge as in their arms.

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"Free in My Name": The Women Who Granted Freedom in Butrint (*Buthrotum*)

The sun was setting over the Strait of Korkyra, casting a golden light upon the white stones of the Sanctuary of Asclepius. The city that had echoed all day with the shouts of sailors and calls of merchants and artisans, was slowly settling into its well-earned evening calm.

Within the sacred enclosure, among ancient oaks and the stone wall that separated the everyday world from the divine, a small group of people had gathered. Among them, Argeia, a woman of mature years, walked with steady steps. She had long awaited this moment. Widowed at a young age, she had inherited a considerable estate from her merchant family, which she had managed with wisdom and dignity, earning the respect of the citizens of Buthrotum. The act she was about to undertake was anything but ordinary. In Butrint, women like her — widows or heiresses who owned slaves — had begun, in ways unusual for their time, to take part in public life. Some among them had chosen to grant freedom to their slaves.

That day, in the presence of Asclepius, Zeus, and her fellow citizens, Argeia freed four slaves — all diligent workers, skilled women housekeepers, and skilled artisans. Among them was a young man named Derdas, who had been part of her household since childhood. When Argeia's brother fell ill, Derdas cared for him during three long years. During those sleepless nights of fever, he prayed in silence to Asclepius and lit torches at the altar for his healing. And the healing came slowly, but surely... just like Argeia's decision to reward him not only with freedom but so with gratitude.

> "*In my name, you are no longer property,* she said. *You are a free man before the eyes of Zeus Soter (the Deliverer).*"

Her words were carved in stone, like hundreds of other acts of manumission that already adorned the walls of the theater, the entrances of temples and the sacred paths of Buthrotum. Yet something set this inscription apart from the rest: it bore the engraved name of a woman with no male co-signer, which is to say no accompanying man's name to guarantee the act of freeing from the bondage of slavery. The inscription stood as clear testimony to its time and place: Buthrotum as a city, unlike many other cities of the ancient world, whereby women were granted not only with voice but also a place in history.

In the temple of Asclepius, the scent of incense rose curling through the air. Argeia knelt and placed a golden coin upon the altar. As she prayed for the freedom and health of her former servants, she glimpsed

the vision of the little girl she once was, watching the men of her city inscribe history upon stone. Today, she wrote her own, alone, without a man at her side. Buthrotum, city of the gods and guardian of freedom won with dignity, now bore her name engraved in stone — for the generations yet to come.

Historical period: 3rd—1st century BCE

Historical overview of the period

The ancient city of Bouthrotos (*Butrot*, *Butrint*), located at the southern tip of the Ksamil Peninsula, occupied a strategic crossroads along the maritime routes of the Ionian coast. Butrint belonged to the Epirote region of Chaonia and, during the Hellenistic period and later under Roman influence, developed into an important cultural and religious center. During this era, the practice of slave manumission was widely documented in Butrint, carrying public, legal and religious significance. Acts of emancipation were engraved on stone and displayed in public structures such as theaters, sanctuaries, and sacred walls, lending the act a solemn dimension — freedom "before the eyes of the gods."

Note: The names of the individuals mentioned are recorded in authentic manumission inscriptions from Butrint.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

In ancient Greek and Roman societies, the role of women was generally limited, defined by social and legal frames that placed them at the periphery of public life. Yet the evidence from between the 3rd and 1st centuries BCE reveals a different reality. In this city, 218 inscriptions have been preserved documenting the emancipation of roughly 600 slaves, carried out "in the presence" of protective deities such as Asclepius (highly venerated in Butrint) and Zeus Soter ("the Deliverer"), giving these acts a juridical, religious and civic character. In many of these inscriptions, the central figure is a woman: acting as head of household, administering property, making independent decisions, and signing acts of manumission without the authorization of a male guardian.

These facts reveal a distinctive form of social organization in Butrint — a territory at the frontier of the Greek world and at the threshold of the Roman era — where the role of women was more visible, autonomous and institutionalized than in the classical Greek city-states. The destiny of the freed individuals, too, reflects a heightened awareness of human dignity and social integration, distinguishing Butrint from the more conventional models of antiquity.

Message

The story of Argeia bears witness to the unique status of women in Butrint, contrasting with reference to the place typically assigned to them in Greek societies of the time. In an ancient world where women were often excluded from public and legal life, every act in which a woman exercised her own will — to free a slave, to defend a right, or to influence community life — opens a precious window onto a more complex and gender-balanced reality than is commonly imagined for antiquity.

The right to grant freedom was not merely a humanitarian gesture but a clear expression of moral, economic and legal authority. Within the family sphere, the woman appears as the center of domestic life — educator of generations, guardian of lineage and administrator of the household economy. She could own property, manage it independently, and act as the head of the family, even serving as a valid witness in legal documents. In the religious sphere, women participated actively, often in high offices as priestesses or interpreters of oracles — roles that gave them significant influence in the spiritual and social life of the community. In some cases, this involvement extended to the uppermost levels of political and religious hierarchy.

This reality positions Butrint not only as a major cultural and juridical center but also as a space where the voice of women was heard and valued — offering a different vision of the ancient world: more diverse, more just and profoundly humane.

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Dance of Nymphs Around the Eternal Flames of the Nymphaeum of Apollonia

Near Apollonia there once flourished a sacred grove where the earth exhaled gases and fire sprang forth from its depths. There stood the Nymphaeum of Apollonia. The eternal flames emerging from underground springs cast an enchanting golden glow that never faded — half light, half dream. It was the place where the water nymphs danced, draped in veils of white and in rays of light.

Batea, a young priestess, had just been appointed guardian of the harmony of this place and servant of Apollo, god of light and music. The elders whispered that Batea had been born on a moonless night, when the flames of the Nymphaeum had risen so high they seemed to touch the sky. They said it was a sign — that Batea had been blessed by the nymphs themselves.

Each year, on the threshold of spring, Apollonia came alive with a sacred festival — the Nymphaia. Young men competed in contests honoring the deities of the forest and the waters, while maidens and women, their hair adorned with gold and flowers of spring, circling around the flames in the dance of the nymphs. A chorus of marriageable girls bewitched the crowd with hymns of the nymphs. In the depths of the forest, hidden among the tall trees and amidst the voices of animals, resounded the gentle breath of Pan's flute. Half-man half-goat, the divine musician emerged from the shadows only during the festival, playing melodies that reached the city's very heart.

At the height of the celebrations, musical contests echoed through the grove: instrumentalists and singers competing for the glory of Apollo.

Batea, though gifted with a rare voice, never took part in these competitions. When the flames began to rise, she sang the secret hymn known only to her — a song that made the earth tremble. She guarded it in her heart, as her mother, also a priestess, had entrusted it to her before disappearing into the endless night. It was the song of nature itself, the one that kept the flames alive and preserved the balance between the world of the living and the realm of the divine.

For years, travelers came from distant lands seeking to uncover the source of the eternal fire. Among them, one stranger arrived — a man who carried along a cold silence, a void that shook Batea to her core. He seemed unmoved by festivities, untouched by beauty and the harmony of body and spirit. He did not feel the music as others did. He did not hear Pan's song. He was not enchanted by the nymphs. Wherever

he walked, he left a dark trace. Everything he touched withered.

As he approached the sacred place, nature began to change. The flames weakened. Darkness overtook the light. The voice of Pan was no longer heard. On the darkest night of her life, Batea understood that the sanctity of that place had to be protected. She led the stranger into the heart of the forest, to the spot where the ancient flame burned without end. There she removed her white veil, laid it upon the ground, and began to sing — for the last time — the ancient hymn.

An unseen wave of celestial breath rekindled the fire and awakened the gods. Her voice rose above the flames, piercing the darkness with power. From the shadows emerged the white maidens — the nymphs — joining Batea in a circle, dancing around the fire that reached the sky.

At dawn, the people of Apollonia found the stranger alone, kneeling by the flames, his eyes filled with a light of yonder. He did not speak. He only gazed, entranced, at the eternal fire. Batea was gone. Upon the sacred waters floated a single white flower — a sign that she had become one with the nymphs, with the flame, with the eternal song of the land. From that day, the hearth burned anew, and from the eternal flames rose the hymn of life.

Historical period: from the 7th century BCE

Historical overview of the period

In the ancient city of Apollonia, founded by Corinthian and Corcyraean colonists in the 7th century BCE on the Adriatic coast (near modern Fier), there existed a Nymphaeum — a sacred place dedicated to the water nymphs believed to inhabit holy springs, protect life, fertility and natural harmony. This Nymphaeum was situated in an area where natural gas emissions created a continuously burning flame. These fires never went out, giving the site a mystical aura; it thus became a place of worship for the nymphs and for Apollo, god of light and music.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The Nymphaeum was associated with a unique oracle mentioned in ancient texts, though its precise location remains unknown. Three nymphs, often depicted in sculptural art from Apollonia, are believed to have embodied this oracular power. In their honor — and as part of the cult of nature and water deities — the Nymphaia festivals were held, including gymnastic contests recorded as early as the 2nd century BCE. Their dedication to nature deities, often represented through choral performance and the presence

of Pan, god of music and the wild, whose melodies were said to echo through the city, likely attest to the organization of a musical competition. Reliefs, coins and figurines discovered in Apollonia depict nymphs dancing in graceful circles, holding musical instruments or raising their hands around a symbol of light — often accompanied by Apollo himself.

In Apollonia, nymphs were not mere decorative mythological figures but beings revered and worshipped by the inhabitants. Their dance around the flames expressed the cycle of life, the renewal of spring, spiritual purification and the coexistence of humans and the divine — a ritual embodying the harmony between nature and humankind.

Note: The name of the main character, Batea, is inspired by the Illyrian name Bato.

Message

The story of Batea is not simply a legend about a sacred place or a forgotten song. It is a powerful reminder that nature has a soul, though lacking a voice... It speaks through the flame, through water, through silence... And waits for someone to listen... Batea becomes a symbol of the human being who chooses not to dominate nature but to feel and defend it, even at the highest cost of self-sacrifice. In a world increasingly deaf to the harmony of living things, this story reminds us that it is an inner song, a deep love and true sacrifice those that preserve the light that sustains life. The eternal flame is not fire —it is our care.

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Ulpiana (*Iustiniana Secunda*) and the Dedication of Justinian

I am Dardani, scribe of sacred manuscripts and keeper of stories not written in books but in stone — for the eyes of those who can read without words. That morning, I learned a truth never spoken aloud: "*The stone laid at the foundation of faith speaks louder than any decree*."

After the earthquake that had toppled walls and altars, the dust of the old world was being replaced by new stone. Emperor Justinian, proud of his Dardanian roots, had ordered the city's reconstruction and granted it a new name — Iustiniana Secunda. It was more than a rebuilding: it was an act of remembrance and power, a declaration that Dardanian blood had not perished but was rising anew — in fresh stone and mosaics glistening beneath the Balkan sun.

Amid the newly raised buildings stood the great basilica, within which a rare mosaic was to be laid, crafted with care and mastery. Each small stone was chosen one by one from the city's quarries, built upon the ruins of the old, as if rooting itself in the very foundations of faith the strength flowing from the past.

Heeeej URBEM DARDANIAE, o heeeej (in the city of Dardania)...

On that cold spring morning, as the scent of freshly laid mortar still filled the air, Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora made a decision that surprised many. Instead of gathering the people in a public square, as tradition dictated for proclamations of this kind, they chose to enter the newly built basilica in silence, away from the noise of the crowd. It was not merely a place for prayer and the dedication made that day was not directed toward divine worship: it was a symbolic act, charged with legal and spiritual significance alike. In a shadowed corner of the basilica, Theodora bowed her head while Justinian spoke softly but with firmness. It was more than a speech. It was an affirmation of the new order being established. That moment, more than any grand ceremony could, bore witness to an epochal transformation. They had chosen the building by not perchance. It was the most visible, the most talked-about in the new city and, precisely for that reason, it became the chosen site for an act profoundly political. Their declaration, though uttered away from the crowd, was more public than any proclamation in the square. It marked a turning point in the relationship between the Church, the Empire and the cities themselves. And it was never forgotten — not by the bishops, not by the citizens, not by history.

Heeeej URBEM DARDANIAE, o heeeej (in the city of Dardania).

Historical period: 6th century CE

Historical overview of the period

Ulpiana lies near the village of Graçanica, southeast of Prishtina (Kosovo), in a strategic position along major ancient routes connecting Dardania with other Roman provinces. The city was founded in the 2nd century CE, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98—117), and took its name *Municipium Ulpiana* from his family name, *Ulpius*. Between the 2nd and 4th centuries it flourished economically, becoming one of the most important cities of Roman Dardania. Emperor Justinian I (482—565), himself of Dardanian origin — from the territory of present-day Kosovo — rebuilt the city after a devastating earthquake in the 5th century CE, renaming it Iustiniana Secunda.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

According to Procopius of Caesarea (*De Aedificiis*, IV, 1, 28—30): "...Among the Dardanians there existed from ancient times a city called Ulpiana. Its surrounding walls had suffered great damage and lost their function, so much of them had to be demolished. Justinian carried out many improvements in this city, giving it the fine appearance it enjoys today; he named it *Iustiniana Secunda*." A significant archaeological discovery made in the summer of 2023 relates to an inscription of Emperor Justinian I and Empress Theodora, found in the mosaic of a large late-antique church built under Justinian's reign. The Latin text bears the dedication *urbs Dardaniae* — "city of Dardania." It is one of the rarest imperial dedications known in the Latin world of Late Antiquity.

Message

The significance of this discovery for the history of ancient Dardania and modern Kosovo is multidimensional: it attests to Emperor Justinian's direct connection to his homeland. The Latin inscription confirms that Justinian himself personally initiated the founding of Iustiniana Secunda. The act simultaneously expresses pride in local origins and a reaffirmation of identity within the empire's vast framework. ts importance is also political: the dedication is not religious and represents the first known dedication to a city rather than to divinity. It constitutes a political decision enacted within a sacred space, shedding light on how, under Justinian's rule, the role of the Church evolved into a distinctly political sphere.

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The Memories Awakened by the Illyrian *Balisca* Wine

Celebrations in the small villa at the outskirts of Rome was reserved to only a few guests: two wine merchants from the Illyrian lands and Titus Aelius Varro, a soldier with silvered hair and deep, probing eyes. He had served for many years as a centurion across various provinces of the Empire.

At the host's signal, abundant food and drink were served. When he learned that the guests came from the Illyrian regions, Titus immediately joined their conversation. Whenever he heard the word *Illyria*, something stirred within him... a pulse, a longing that no discipline could suppress... Slowly, his heart seemed to swell, ready to burst from his chest.

— *From which land do you come?* he asked, trying to steady his voice.
The younger merchant, a man with sharp eyes and a thick beard, smiled.
— *From Dyrrachium. We have just brought to market our finest wine — we call it Balisca.*

The servant lifted the amphora onto his shoulder. Titus's gaze fixed on the seal that hung from the vessel's neck, a small mark of vine leaves encircling the letter **D**, the monogram of Dyrrachium. He knew that symbol all too well. His face turned pale. A distant memory rising like a tide and engulfing him... an image from a past that could not turn back... As he drank the first sip of wine, her silhouette appeared before him and he heard again the echo of her laughter. Titus had met Diona during a months-long posting near Dyrrachium. One summer day, while searching for the road to camp, his eyes caught sight of her... a beautiful young woman tending the family vineyards, renowned as the finest in the region. Her father was the most skilled producer of *balisca* wine, a craft passed down through generations and guarded with sacred devotion. For the vintners of Dyrrachium, *balisca* was more than a drink. It was a living bond with the past, with the soil that nourished their people and the deities who blessed the harvest.

Music had begun at the Roman feast. Courtesans and dancers filled the hall. Titus's thoughts drifted back to the first celebration he had attended among the Illyrians.

— *You are a strange people,* he told the merchants, who seemed unaccustomed to Roman excess. *In your feasts, women take part as men do — they speak freely and drink among them.*
The merchants smiled, their eyes carrying a quiet reverence for their homeland's customs.
— *In our village,* said the elder merchant, *women are the heart of every feast. They care for the vineyards, the wine and the stories they tell so beautifully. Without them, a feast would be but an ordinary day.*

— You Illyrians eat seated and know how to celebrate until dawn, yet never lose yourselves to drink as others do. How do you know when to stop?

The two men exchanged a knowing glance. The younger lifted the edge of his cloak and showed the belt tied around his waist.

— It is our tradition to restrain ourselves by tightening the belt…

Titus smiled faintly. As he drank more of the sweet wine, the vision of Diona grew clearer. He longed to be there again, in the heart of Illyria, beside Diona with her wavy hair and crystal skin, amidst the green vineyards, the scent of new wine and songs rising towards the sky. He wished he could leave war behind and go on living with her by the sea, waking each morning to the music of the waves. That night, he did not wish to lose her image. Rising from the table, he took the amphora in his arms and withdrew, wrapped in the warmth of reminiscences. He approached the window and it seemed to him that across the sea… he glimpsed that Illyrian girl once more… brought back to life by this blessed sweet wine. How he wished that night that *balisca* would never end…

Historical period: from the late 4th century BCE to the 1st century CE

Historical overview of the period

For Illyrians wine represented a distinctive element of both material and spiritual heritage, encompassing not only viticulture and production (notwithstanding its modest in scale) but also the social, regal and religious dimensions of its consumption. Archaeological evidence for wine use dates back to as early as the 6th century BCE. Contact with Greeks and Romans deepened the tradition, making wine a symbol of both sacred offerings and social communion — consumed during communal festivities, feasts dedicated to deities and council gatherings.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

Alongside the numerous archaeological finds related to wine transport (amphorae), mixing vessels and fine tableware, historical sources also document local Illyrian wine production. Aristotle (832a.22) mentions a honey-based wine produced by the Illyrians known as the Taulantii, made from honeycombs — a strong and

very sweet drink. Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* XIV.2) records that the most celebrated Illyrian wine was the Balisca, produced from the Balisk grape variety cultivated around Dyrrachium. It was exported to Rome before the Augustan period and aged remarkably well. Some scholars even suggest that the vineyards of Bordeaux may trace their lineage to this Dyrrachian variety. Ancient sources such as Theopompus (FGrH 115 F 38, ap. Athenaeus 11.476d) describe Illyrian banquets, noting their distinctive traits by comparison to Greek and Roman customs.

Message

This story emphasizes respect for cultural traditions while articulating universal human dimensions transcending cultural or ethnic boundaries, encompassing pure feelings, memories and the sense of belonging. By way of contrasts, it highlights wisdom in moderation and the balance between joy and self-restraint — between sensibility and devotion.

Meaning in today's context

The episode transcends cultural borders, suggesting that essential human values and experiences — love, memory, care for others and harmony with nature — are universal and surpass both geography and time. Through the figure of the Illyrian maiden, depicted as a pure vision and an ideal of love and nature, the narrative invites reflection on what truly endures in human condition: the sense of belonging, peace and living memories which permeate through a people's traditions.

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Via Egnatia, *Ad Quintum*, and the *Centurion* Marcus Sabidius Maximus

The sun had risen above the hills flanking the Via Egnatia. The newly built station of Ad Quintum hummed of travelers' footsteps and of mingled voices of people from distant provinces, while the afternoon sun scorched the stones that paved its courtyard.

Weary soldiers, merchants laden with fine goods and silent peasants rested in the shade cast by the walls. Some waited their turn to refresh themselves in the baths, others awaited the caravans that would carry them onward. From the inn came the sound of clinking cups and the aroma of roasted meat wafting through the air.

At one table sat an elderly man, his back straight yet his gaze fixed somewhere far away. Marcus Sabidius Maximus—once a strong young man from Dyrrachium, now only a stranger in his own land, with deep wrinkles and hands twisted by time. When a group of younger travelers asked him about his sword and the belt marked with the legion's emblem, he smiled faintly and began to speak.

— *I no longer keep it for battle,* he said, studying the weathered blade. *Now it's only a memory...*

They listened intently, as he spoke with the calm of one who seeks not to boast, but simply to unburden himself of memories heavy on his weary shoulders. Maximus had spent his life among weapons. He reached for his cup and took a small sip, then glanced at the legionary belt hanging by his side.

— *This sword has saved my life three times,* he added softly. *In Upper Moesia, in Syria and later in Dacia. For my bravery, Emperor Hadrian himself awarded me a medal of honor.*

A medal of honor for victories—yet a heavy burden on the soul for the lives cut short. He no longer knew into which abyss that medal of valor had fallen, as his nights passed filled with restless dreams that lasted until dawn.

— *They were never my wars, nor my battles!* he murmured, eyes brimming with weariness and regret.

After all those years of war, he longed to spend the remainder of his life in peace, away from arms, away from pain. His tired heart sought rest: a place to hear the sounds of life, not its suffering.... a place to hide, under the shade of trees... a place to surrender to the quiet music of nature... And Scampa, with its soft hills and pure air, invited him to remain—as an apt final station for him, eternally... As night fell over the inn

at Ad Quintum, the clatter of cups and laughter mingled with the joy and exhaustion of travelers moving between East and West, who had found shelter by the Via Egnatia. The walls had heard a thousand stories—tales of bravery, defeats, dreams and griefs. As silence slowly settled over the surrounding hills, the Roman station stood as a silent witness to life that continued to hum... with dreams, novel journeys and hopes yet unbroken...

Historical period: 2nd century CE

Historical overview of the period

The Via Egnatia was an ancient Roman road following the valley of the Shkumbin River, built between 146 and 120 BCE by the Roman proconsul Gaius Egnatius, from whom it took its name. It was the eastern extension of the Via Appia, the famous road connecting Rome to the port of Brundisium. In present-day Albanian territory, it had two branches: one from Epidamnos—Dyrrachium, and another from Apollonia, merging near Scampa (Elbasan) before then continuing towards Thessalonica, ancient Macedonia and onward to Constantinople, traversing the Balkans for approximately 1,120 kilometers.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The Via Egnatia included several waystations, branching to start with Dyrrachium, then following Ad Quintum, linking to the complex of Roman baths and the nymphaeum at Bradashesh. These Roman stations were crucial points of rest, supply and lodging for travelers, soldiers and couriers during the imperial period. From the same period as the Ad Quintum station (2nd century CE) dates a funerary stele, now displayed in the Ethnographic Museum of Elbasan, belonging to Marcus Sabidius Maximus, of the Aemilia tribe, originally from Dyrrachium and a high-ranking officer in the Roman army. In the final years of his life, he settled in Scampa.

Message

Through a human story, this piece explores the layered symbolism of the Via Egnatia—a road that embodied the union of Eastern and Western civilizations. Along this route traveled not only people and goods but also

ideas, beliefs and spiritual traditions. It reflects the dual nature of human history: destruction through countless wars waged by the legions, yet creation through the building and rebuilding that followed. The Via Egnatia thus stands as a metaphor of constant transformation—where the movement of people carried with it the movement of identities. It remains a cultural and historical heritage that connects the past with the present across all the lands it traverses.

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Grama's Bay – A Heaven of Hope for Sailors

The wind blew fiercely from the southeast, raising the Ionian waters into tumult and gushing with foaming the crested waves. Restless and dark, the sea hurled itself with fury against the rugged cliffs of Karaburun. Draped in black clouds, the sky looked utterly hopeless. Amid the storm, a Byzantine ship with tattered sails and a broken mast fought desperately against the mounting waves. Onboard the ship, outstanding, none other than Emperor John Palaiologos. Frantically searching for shelter and escaping utter destruction, a glimmer of light in the storm-worn faces of the crew emerged as then, amidst the savage rocks, the Karaburun hidden bay suddenly revealed itself.

The next morning, the tempest had subsided. The sun slowly illuminated the damp rock faces, revealing ancient inscriptions — forgotten names, prayers of sailors and wishes of travelers who had once anchored in that very bay. The Emperor stood silently before them for a long time. Hope and fear were eternally carved into stone.

Those traces from visitors past reminded him that, in the face of nature and the lot of fate, man — even an emperor — remains but fragile. He decided to leave his own mark upon the rock. He did not carve a prayer or a plea, but a simple testimony: that in the distant year 6877 of the Byzantine calendar, he too had stood there, like so many before him, facing the same blind force. This was a profoundly human gesture, a sign marking his being there, facing storm and fear and experiencing the fragile spark of hope.

When the ship was ready to depart, the sun was already rising above the now-calmed Ionian waters. John Palaiologos cast one last look at the inscription he had left behind, then turned — without a word — toward the open sea. The voyage to Rome had begun: a journey of final hope toward the shores of the Adriatic, where, in the halls of the Vatican, Pope Urban V still kept alive the faint light of belated aid.

Historical period: From the 3rd century BCE to the 15th century CE (and even into modern times)

Historical overview of the period

The Bay of Grama, positioned on the western side of the Karaburun Peninsula and facing Sazan Island, has been known since antiquity as a natural refuge for ships during storms — and as a site where fresh,

drinkable water could be found. Its name, *Grama*, derives from the Greek *gramma* ("inscription"), owing to the hundreds of carvings engraved into the rock by sailors, soldiers, pilgrims, captains and ordinary travelers who had at a point sought shelter there.

With its secluded position at the southern tip of Karaburun, the bay represents one of the most unique sites of Albania's spiritual heritage whereby the sea, man and faith resound. Though rooted in historical fact, the site has acquired mythical and sacred dimensions within the collective memory of sailors from Albania and beyond.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

Originally exploited as a quarry, the cliffs of Grama preserve more than 1,500 inscriptions, carved from the 3rd century BCE onward. The latest belong to the medieval period, including Latin inscriptions from the imperial epoch and centuries after. Most of them are dedicated to the Dioscuri — Castor and Pollux, divine protectors of sailors and ships. The inscriptions generally follow a similar formula, where the author seeks divine help for companions, relatives, crewmates or fellow soldiers.The travelers came from both nearby and distant lands — Asia Minor (Ilion, Phocaea, Heraclea Pontica) and even Palestine (Sebastia).

Among the many names, we find references to historical figures, such as Gnaeus Pompeius, rival of Julius Caesar (49–48 BCE). The most remarkable document dates from 1369 CE, recording the stay of John Palaiologos, Emperor of the Romans, who sought refuge in the bay before continuing toward Venice and later Rome, where he met Pope Urban V to secure aid amid the worsening situation in Constantinople and the advance of Ottoman forces.

Message

The Bay of Grama stands as both a natural and spiritual sanctuary for the people of the sea — a place of reverence and communion with the divine in confronting the unknown expanse of the waters. In facing the immense forces of nature and the decline of an empire, even an emperor is reduced to the essence of humanity: seeking meaning, hope and eternity not in the vestiges of power, but rather through a single trace left upon stone.

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Victors in the Arena – The Amphitheatre of Dyrrachium

That morning, the sea was calm and the ships glided slowly toward the Adriatic shore. The sun shimmered upon the blue waters. Dyrrachium, the ancient city, gradually revealed itself on a green hillside. Travelers gathered on deck, eyes fixed on the coast, waiting eagerly to glimpse the monument that had drawn them from the farthest edges of the Empire — the newly built amphitheatre everyone was talking about.

Epikadēs, together with his father, had come expressly to witness the festive inauguration of the Amphitheatre of Dyrrachium and the opening its doors for the first time. They disembarked and wandered through the cobbled streets leading to the city's center, amid the hum of footsteps, the scent of wine and the sharp tang of lime. Taverns buzzed with the lively voices of people drinking, talking and passionately debating. The topic at every table being one and only: the finest gladiators who that day would fight in the arena. No one could recall any such a spectacle — twelve pairs of combatants, each acclaimed as surpassing the strength and repute of the other.

— *Come,* said his father, guiding him toward the southern entrance of the amphitheatre. They entered the cool gallery shade where few people passed. There, upon a block of stone, was an ancient inscription. Epikadēs approached and read aloud the faded words, still resonant despite the passage of time: "Kleosthenes, son of Pontius, victor in the four-horse chariot race at the Olympic Games. Erected in honor of the city and for the glory of the gods."

Epikadēs touched the stone, feeling the weight of history it carried. It was not merely an inscription. It was a link to the past, to the people who had brought honor to Dyrrachium and given it renown across the world. It was the first time he had come face to face with such a direct trace from such glory of the distant past — a young man from his own city competing and triumphing among the world's best. Epikadēs said nothing, but within him rose a deep reverence for someone he had never known.

He turned his eyes toward the arena. The gladiators had begun their combats. The spectators' shouts rose and fell like waves beneath the clear sky of Dyrrachium, as history and the present clashed in a magnificent encounter. The amphitheatre was not a cold monument, but the city's beating heart — a place where the glory of the past and the strength of the present coexisted in timeless harmony.

Historical period: 2nd—4th centuries CE

Historical overview of the period

The city of Dyrrachium, one of the most important ports on the eastern Adriatic, gained particular significance during the Roman period. Emperor Augustus settled there a large number of veterans, granting them Roman citizenship and elevating the city to the status of a Roman colony. As Dyrrachium grew into a regional center of major importance, the need arose for the construction of an amphitheatre worthy of its stature.

Built in the 2nd century CE, the Amphitheatre of Dyrrachium ranks among the largest in the Balkans (amphitheatres are rare along the eastern Adriatic coast), with a capacity estimated between 15,000 and 20,000 spectators. Constructed on the southwestern slope of the city hill, it commands a monumental view. Its façade, three stories high and facing the sea, gave the structure a grand architectural presence visible from afar.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

According to an inscription (*CJL III, 1, 607*), twelve pairs of gladiators fought during the amphitheatre's inauguration games. Although it was not used for Olympic contests in the classical sense, the building embodied the Roman ideal of physical spectacle, valor in confrontation and public glory for the victors. Local tradition connects the amphitheatre to earlier athletic triumphs and the enduring memory of those who had returned from Olympia as champions. One of the most renowned was Kleosthenes of Dyrrachium, son of Pontius, who won the four-horse chariot race (*Pausanias*, VI 10.6) and dedicated his prize — depicting the chariot, the horses, their driver and owner — to his native city.

Message

This story highlights the deep bond between past and present and the power of historical memory in shaping both personal and collective identity. Through Epikadēs' eyes, we perceive how the Amphitheatre of Dyrrachium (modern Durrës) represents not merely a physical structure but a living space where ancient glory and contemporary vitality meet in eternal harmony. At its core, this narrative speaks of the enduring strength of memory, the link to one's roots, and how the past continues to define the present and inspire the future.

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The Lake of Seferan and the Offerings of the "Earth's Fair Ones"

Along the shores of the lake, the first leaves of the white water lilies had just begun to unfurl. Soon, the maidens of the nearby village would take part in the ceremonies held in honor of the Goddess of the Waters. Since ancient times, the lake had been considered sacred. Young women, at the threshold of marriage, would choose the finest figurines — adorned with garlands and clusters of unopened flowers, pure and unblossomed as they themselves were — and offer them to the goddess, asking for her protection, for the fertility of the land and for happiness in their future homes. The maidens imbued those small clay figures with their wishes and dreams, their prayers and hopes. Through them, they sought the godesses's favor— her blessings to move forward in life, to build a family and to bloom like the lilies that graced the lake's surface each spring.

On the last evening of spring, as the air still carried the scent of damp earth and the water flowed silently, the young women descended by the lake. Dressed in white, their hair loose and woven with wildflowers, walking barefoot over the tender grass. Each carried in her hands her own figurine — the delicate image of her purity and devotion. The elder women followed from a distance, silent but proud. They knew this path well, for they too had once walked it, in the same ancient ceremony.

They reached the blessed lake. In the stillness of the night, one could hear the distant song of birds and even the soft rustling of ripples upon the water. One by one, the maidens knelt and placed their figurines upon the broad leaves of water lilies. Gently, without a sound, they set them afloat. In the moon's pale glow, the figurines began to drift, some slowly and others swiftly, until they vanished from sight, sinking into the lake's silence and depths.

By morning, when the first rays of sunlight touched the water, new lilies had blossomed — white and pure like the maidens' own souls. The Goddess of the Waters had accepted their prayers. On quiet spring nights, when the moon shimmered on the lake's surface and the breeze carried the lilies' fragrance, sweet melodies rose from houses nearby — ancient songs, long prayers, blessings and endless tales spun around the girls who had been received by the Goddess. These were unbroken threads weaving across generations, keeping alive hope and replenishing the strength of life in this sacred place.

Historical period: 4th—2nd centuries BCE

Historical overview of the period

The lakes of Dumre in central Albania are of karstic origin, formed through the natural dissolution of limestone over millions of years — a typical phenomenon of karst landscapes. They vary greatly in size and depth, forming an essential part of the region's ecosystem and serving as vital sources for agriculture and daily life. Lake Seferan, located near Belsh, is among the largest of the Dumre lakes, surrounded by hills and hidden places that for centuries have been imbued with stories and popular beliefs.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The great drought of 1982 caused the water level of Lake Seferan to drop significantly, revealing a remarkable treasure of archaeological objects, most notably terracotta figurines of young women and maidens. The discovery identified the site as a sacred place where women — at pivotal moments of transition in their lives — offered gifts to deities associated with water, fertility, marriage and childbirth. The lake, whose very essence is water, embodies both life and fertility, for nature and for humankind alike.

Message

This story conveys the profound message that key moments of a woman's passage into adulthood — love, marriage and the bond with life itself — take on a sacred meaning when experienced in harmony with nature, tradition and the deep rhythms of the human spirit. Such experiences are no mere personal events, but part of the uninterrupted life cycle in which each generation supports and guides the next, ensuring the renewal of life and meaning.

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"The Mountain of the Illyrian Kings": The Rock-Cut Tombs of Lower Selca (Seltza)

Encircled by high mountains along the valley of the Shkumbin (Genusus) where the wind still carries whispers of antiquity, once stood Selca e Poshtme, the heart of the Illyrian tribe of the Desaretes. Thereabouts the mountain slope became a place of pride and a strong and silent people carved into stone the glory of their kings.

The master stone-carver, a humble and taciturn man, worked the rock as though conversing with it. His hands were strong, yet his eyes bore a quiet sorrow transpiring the awareness that all his hands shaped was meant for those who would never speak again...

When the king summoned him and revealed his wish to build an array of royal tombs for himself and for his descendants, the master understood the request was not just for crafting the resting place for the body, but also a dwelling that would speak to eternity. The monument had to address the generations to come: whoever would one day stand before that mountain rock would have to feel the grandeur of a people's dream.

The master worked with devotion for a decade, day and night, upon the living rock. His hammer and chisel told the story: he sculpted the helmets of victorious warriors, the shields of fallen heroes, the swords that had flashed in battle, the laurel leaves that crowned both triumph and mourning, the tears of mothers for sons lost in war and the funeral songs that once stirred the hearts of his people. This way the mountain became home to no mere tomb, but rather a verysome temple of memory, the testimony to a dream.

The craftsman lived long enough to witness the death of the king — a loss that left a profound emptiness in the hearts of his people. It is said that on the night of the king's burial, as the moonlight touched the cliffs, a gentle glow appeared upon the royal tomb. It was no torch burning in the dark, but something akin to a soft radiance emanating from within the stone itself — like a restless spirit seeking to speak. The elders of the village, who saw it with their own eyes, would later say that the light was not the sign of a cursed soul, but the yearning of a king who could not yet find peace, for his dream of a just and secure future for his land remained yet unfulfilled.

Since then, the shimmering light is said to return on certain nights — a silent remembrance that somewhere,

in the heart of the rock, lies a king who still dreams and awaits the day when life and glory will intertwine once more upon these lands, rekindling the history and pride of an indomitable people.

Historical period: 4th—3rd centuries BCE

Historical overview of the period

The settlement of Lower Selca (Gradishta e Selcës), near Pogradec, lies on the right bank of the Shkumbin River and in antiquity occupied a strategic position, controlling the ancient route connecting Dyrrachium with Macedonia. The site is renowned for its monumental rock-cut tombs, carved into the mountainside with arched funerary chambers and imposing architectural façades. Archaeological finds (including reliefs of *bukrania*, helmets, and Illyrian-type shields) date the complex to between the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. Based on their structure and decoration, these tombs are interpreted as the burial places of Illyrian kings, possibly Bardylis, the "First King of the Illyrians," or his son Cleitus.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The royal necropolis of Selca e Poshtme represents not only a funerary site but also a **major** collective enterprise, both economic and social, for the Illyrian community. Its construction required substantial effort — skilled artisans and laborers, materials and careful management of natural resources. On a social level, the tombs expressed the highest form of tribal identity and power, uniting the community around a common mission that transcended individual life. They served as ceremonial landmarks, symbols of unity and pride, and enduring signs of reverence toward ancestors and cultural heritage.

Message

True grandeur and glory are not bound to what is transient or material, but rather live on through memory and legacy left behind by people and leaders alike. By way of stone craftsmanship, perseverance and faith, human hands created that which transcends time: a symbol rooted in identity and bespeaking of the enduring dream for a better future. The light that shines from within the rock symbolizes hope, the silent promise and powerful reminder that

the spirit and history of a people can outlast physical time itself. At its heart, this story bespeaks of the eternity of values, the power of remembrance and the hope that continues to inspire generations to come.

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The Myth of Cadmus in Illyria

The old inhabitants of Pogradec and its surrounding villages tell that, deep at the very bottom of Lake Ohrid, facing the hills of Gështenjas, there lies a carved and forgotten stone throne. According to local lore, every morning Cadmus would sit there to gaze upon his tranquil and vanished kingdom. The throne, it is said, rests upon two rocks shaped like serpents, their bodies extending into the dark depths of the lake.

It is told that once a year, when the moon turns red and silence covers the lake's surface, the throne rises for a brief moment above the waves. Whoever sees it will either receive a king's fortune — or go mad from the sacred vision. An old man used to recount that his grandfather had once seen the throne on a summer night, but had never spoken again. In a dream, Cadmus had appeared to him, commanding him to keep silent so that the secret of the lost kingdom remain undisclosed.

Some young men who once dared to seek the throne by boat claimed to have heard sounds of groaning and rattling of chains echoing from underneath the water, as if it were the voice of a bound king awaiting his release. An elderly woman warned them: *"Do not disturb him! Cadmus is not dead. He guards Illyria!"*

Historical period: from the 5th century BCE onward

Historical overview of the period

The myth of Cadmus features amongst the oldest narratives of Greek mythology, mentioned by Euripides (*The Bacchae*, 1330–1341) and Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca*, III, 5, 4). Closely linked with the foundation of Thebes, it recounts how Cadmus, a Phoenician prince, set out to find his sister Europa, abducted by Zeus, and in doing so founded new civilizations. According to ancient sources, after a reign marked by both greatness and tragedy, Cadmus and his wife Harmonia left Thebes and journeyed northwest, to the lands of the Illyrian tribe of the Enchelei — later known as the Desaretes — who inhabited the region around Lake Ohrid. Herein, myth and Illyrian history intertwine: Cadmus not only lived in Illyria but also fought neighboring tribes and founded a city. This is one of the rare cases where a Greek mythological figure becomes integrated into the local Illyrian mythic tradition.

The Cadmus myth is unique in classical literature because it is the only Greek myth that explicitly situates Illyria as its mythical setting. No other Greek hero is so clearly portrayed in ancient sources as traveling to, ruling over, and settling in Illyrian lands. Ancient authors did not treat Illyria as an undefined frontier land but rather described the territory of the Enchelei (corresponding to the Pogradec—Ohrid region) as the very place where Cadmus lived and reigned. This precise geographic localization makes the myth profoundly significant for Illyrian mythology, even though its origins remain Phoenician and Greek. Through centuries of contact and cultural exchange well-attested by archaeology, the myth was adopted and reinterpreted by local Illyrian elites, who embraced Cadmus as their mythic ancestor.

Conditions that gave rise to the narrative

One of the most intriguing archaeological finds linked to the Cadmus myth is a bronze belt plaque (22 × 5 cm) discovered among the grave goods of the rock-cut tombs at Lower Selca. The scene depicts a standing warrior with his right arm raised, hurling a spear. To his right and left stand two soldiers mounted on horses. All three figures wear Illyrian-style helmets and carry Macedonian-type shields. A fallen warrior lies besides the horseman on the left, whereas a monstrous creature is depicted running towards the right-hand side horse, whereby a bird is shown taking flight. At the left edge appears a large serpent, with its scaly body coiled twice and its head raised and turned toward the horseman, as though offering him protection.

Message

The figure of Cadmus metamorphosed into a serpent embodies the positive forces of military protection and ancestral guardianship — values deeply resonant with Illyrian beliefs. Objects such as the Selca belt plaque visually echo this symbolism. Although the myth itself is not of local origin, it was naturally assimilated into Illyrian culture by virtue of harmonizing with their traditional symbols and worldview. Cadmus, as a "marginal" hero, became an intermediary figure — representing the passage from chaos to order, from wilderness to civilization. In this sense, he emerged as a cultural archetype, a trans-Balkan hero whose significance transcended linguistic and ethnic boundaries, bridging worlds through myth.

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The Albanian Eagles of Koman

Church bells rang through the cold dawn of that early winter morning. Their sound echoed from the walls of Sarda, rolled down the jagged hills, drifted across the calm waters of the Drin River, and reached — faint and solemn — the outskirts of Koman.

That morning, by the riverbank, kin from a family old as the very the stones of the city, gathered to lay their patriarch to rest. He had been more than a leader. He had been a guardian of traditions and memory preserving the very name of the land, with a devotion akin to that of preserving words woven in the songs of ancestors. His passing away was more than a death. Amid the silent grief and restrained tears in the final preparations, they placed on his hand a bronze ring engraved with a symbol — the eagle — heirloom of generations past. It was not merely a family mark, but an emblem of heights, strength and irrepressible freedom of spirit.

— "He will be buried with it," said the eldest of the house. "Just so as he lived — with the eagle at his heart."

The bells tolled louder, as if following the rhythm of the hearts left behind — hearts convinced that the symbol would not vanish with his body. For the eagle does not live in bronze. It lives through memories cherished by generations, the unyielding courage not to bow, the pride of deep roots and the strength to soar high.

The bells fell silent, but the mist lingered over the valley. Within it resounded memory itself — carved like an eagle — rooted in the land where ancestral bones rest and still living in the remembrance of those whose name shall be voiced across centuries.

Historical period: 10th—12th centuries CE

Historical overview of the period

The ancient settlement of Koman, located in the middle valley of the Drin River, spreads across several steep hills at altitudes of 600—700 meters, covering a total area of about 40 hectares. While disappearing in the 16th century following the Ottoman conquest, it bears witness to a major medieval city and an important diocese of the early Arbër civilization. The site features three levels — upper, middle, and lower — and its

defining topographic feature is the presence of two churches, one in the lower and one in the upper part of the settlement, both serving as spiritual and communal centers for their respective populations.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The necropolis lies near the churches, reflecting the deep connection between life, faith and funerary ritual. It represents one of the largest burial areas of its period, with tombs rich in grave goods. Studies show that the family played a central role in managing and preserving the burial place as a site of collective memory over multiple generations. Their strategies of remembrance appear in architecture (such as tomb structures conceived for successive reuse) and in the social dimension by way of accumulation and transmission of wealth and symbolic artifacts. Recent excavations at the Koman necropolis have uncovered several bronze rings engraved with a single-headed eagle. This discovery is significant for understanding the cultural and identity features of the population that inhabited the region during the early medieval period. The eagle has long been a powerful symbol in Albanian culture, with meanings that evolved over centuries. In the context of Koman, the single-headed eagle, depicted on funerary rings, likely carried protective or identity-related significance, especially for individuals of elevated social rank. Its presence in burial contexts reveals not only its symbolic importance in daily life but also its function as a marker of cultural belonging and collective memory after death. These findings offer tangible evidence of the strong cultural and identity continuity linking the inhabitants of Koman with the enduring emblem of Albanian heritage.

Message

This piece conveys a timeless truth: memory does not die. It lives on in the soil that preserves the traces of the ancestors, in the symbols passed down from one generation to the next, and in the hearts of generations following. The eagle — carved in bronze and alive in collective remembrance — embodies freedom, strength and endurance.

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In the Footsteps of Gjergj Kastrioti: The Castle of Petrela

Arbëria was passing through the darkest storms of its history. The black banners of an empire that sought to destroy everything it touched, moved like shadows across the lands Arbëria. While Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu fought battles in Mat and Dibra, a small fortress, perched atop a steep cliff in the valley of the Erzen River, stood unshaken — it was the Castle of Petrela.

There lived Mamica Kastrioti, Skënderbeu's youngest sister. After losing both her husband and son in the wars against the Ottomans, she took command of the castle herself. It was a rare act of courage for the time, yet her determination and wisdom won the loyalty of all who lived under her watch. They called her with reverence: "*The Lady of the Castle*."

One spring morning, a gloomy message reached Petrela: the Ottoman troops had crossed the Shkumbin River and were fast approaching the valley. Mamica understood at once. Before striking Kruja, they would try to break Petrela — the only strategic barrier hindering their advance toward Durrës and further on Kruja itself. In the nearby towers of Dorëz, men and women alike had taken up arms and set ambushes.

Under the light of a full moon, Mamica gathered her people in the courtyard of the castle: "Our leader, Gjergj Kastrioti, fights far from here. But on these ancient stones, blood has been shed so that the land of our ancestors would never be forsaken. We may be few, but we have each other. And above all — we have besa."

The next day, the enemy appeared on the horizon, armed to the teeth. The siege began. By day, Mamica dispensed food, sent out messengers and supervised the defenses. By night, she patrolled the ramparts herself, whispering the old prayers her grandfather had once taught her.

A few days before the siege, she had sought strength by retracing the footsteps of Petrela's history. She climbed toward the ruins of Persqopi, where the walls of an ancient fortress still stood as testimony to a forgotten glory. Then she descended through the narrow canyon leading to the Erzen River, touching the traces that forebears carved into the rocks of Pëllumbas Cave.

When the night sky flared red with a fire signal from Persqopi, help arrived. Warriors from Dorëz and the surrounding fortresses attacked the enemy's southern flank. The Ottomans were taken by surprise and crushed, not knowing from where the blow had come.

Today, the Castle of Petrela still stands proudly above the valley of the Erzen river — a silent witness to an age both bloody and glorious. The name of Mamica Kastrioti lives on in legend, in the whispers of the stones and in memories that never fade. History may often forget women who raised the shield of the nation, but the walls of Petrela remember all too well: without Mamica, the castle would never have withstood.

Historical period: 14th–15th centuries CE

Historical overview of the period

The Castle of Petrela, located about 15 km southeast of Tirana, occupies a strategic position on a high hill overlooking the Erzen valley and the ancient trade routes that passed through it. Though its origins go back to antiquity, the castle took on its fortified medieval form during the 15th century CE. From the 13th–14th centuries onward, Petrela was part of the domains of the Topia family, the princes of Arbër.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

In the 15th century, during the wars between Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu and the Ottoman armies, Petrela became a key strategic stronghold — both as part of the defensive network and as a lookout post. The castle also served as the residence of Mamica Kastrioti, Skënderbeu's sister, who had married into the Topia family. During the course of these wars, she remained in Petrela, transforming it into a center of resistance.

Message

The history of Petrela Castle bears witness to the unity and courage of a people who refused to surrender, even when all odds seemed to be against them. It stands as a symbol of memory and resistance — a reminder that those who fought, though often unnamed, upheld the foundations of their nation with besa, sacrifice and courage.

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The Language That Endured – The Legend of the German Knight

On his journey toward the Holy Land, the knight Arnold von Harff came ashore on the Albanian coast, in Durrës. In his travel diary, he wrote that the city had strong walls, lively trade and a mixed population of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims. Yet what struck him most was *the language* he heard spoken there.

Von Harff was a tireless traveler and chronicler of the world he encountered. He had crossed mountains and seas, writing in Greek, Turkish, Italian... until one day he heard a sound unlike any he had before.

An old man with a white *qeleshe* cap called out to his son in words that seemed carved out in stone: — *Eja, bir! Buka është gati.* (*Come, son! The meal is ready.*)

The knight looked up. He could not understand the words, yet he felt their weight. Turning to the innkeeper, he asked,

— "What language do these people speak?"

— "They speak *Shqip*," the man replied. "It's the language of our stone."

Intrigued by the unfamiliar sounds, Arnold began to collect words, asking for translations and carefully noting them in his travel book: *vene*, *krup*, *criste*, *kale*, *myreprema*... [wine, salt, crest, horse, good evening...]

In his diary, he wrote in Old German: "Item dese stat lijcht in Albanijen dae sij ouch eyn eygen spraiche haynt, der man nyet wael geschrijuen en kan, as sij geyn eygen liter in deme lande en hauen."*(This city, Durrës, lies in Albania, where they also have their own language, which cannot be written well, for in this land they have no letters of their own.)*

"These are words," he whispered to himself, "spoken by a people who may lack paper, yet possess a soul"... "It is a language I may never understand, but I will preserve it — for those who come after."

As he looked toward the mountains, he added to his diary: "The inhabitants are strong, silent and stern. They bow to no one. The language they speak is unlike any other I have heard. They call it *Shqip*."

That night, in a remote corner of a fragmented empire, words Albanians became committed to writing for the first time.

Words that Arnold von Harff recorded were no mere strange sounds to foreign ears, but also invisible threads of our collective memory — words of a language guarded within the bosom of people's hearts across centuries.

Historical period: Late 15th century (around 1496)

Historical overview of the period

By the end of the 15th century, Albania stood at one of its most perilous crossroads. The organized resistance against the Ottoman Empire had collapsed. Fortresses were falling one after another. Skanderbeg had passed into legend and thousands of Albanians were migrating toward Italy, *Arbëria e Poshtme* (Lower *Arbëria*), and beyond. The darkness of conquest and exile seemed to engulf everything. Yet even under that boding shadow, the Albanian language persevered as a light that could not be extinguished — unwritten in books but spoken on every doorstep, preserved in songs, whispered in curses and adorning prayers. It was the language of blessing and mourning, the language of greeting and of *besa*. At this very moment, a young knight from Cologne — Arnold von Harff — traveled through *Albanyen*, as he called it, and without realizing it, left behind one of the earliest written records of the Albanian language. In his travel chronicle, amidst descriptions of cities, shrines and medieval customs, he paused to record words of a tongue unlike any other he had heard — a language he identified as *"albanische spraiche"* (Albanian language).

Conditions that gave rise to the event

In December 1496, Arnold von Harff set sail from Italy and landed at Durrës, on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He was not a conqueror but a traveler driven by faith and curiosity, eager to describe the world as he saw it. While documenting the towns and landscapes along his route, he encountered something entirely new: a language spoken by locals that matched none of the tongues he knew — not Latin, Greek, Slavonic, nor Turkish.

Von Harff transcribed what he could — a small handful of words — perhaps unaware that he was creating a linguistic monument. His short notes represent the earliest external testimony to the Albanian language, written decades before the famous *Formula e Pagëzimit* ("Baptismal Formula") recorded by Pal Engjëlli in 1462.

At a time when the Albanian language had no alphabet of its own, no grammar and no literary tradition, von Harff's notation served as the first bridge between speech and script — the first time the living voice of a people found expression on paper.

Message

The Albanian language was not born in royal courts or imperial chancelleries. It was not decreed into existence — it was sung, wept, whispered and shouted. It lived in the voices of mothers, the songs of shepherds, the blessings of weddings and the cries of warriors in the battlefield. Scholars did not invent it. People preserved it. A language existing before writing itself — and precisely because it lived, it survived.

At the close of a turbulent century, the foreign knight Arnold von Harff paused, listened and put down into writing a few Albanian words. For us today, this personal act of a knight writing strange words in his diary acquires the proportions of a monumental testimony to the Albanian language by now a national official language written and spoken across continents. This episode reminds us that a language is not only a means of communication but a living memory, an act of survival and a heritage of spiritual creation.

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Sazan – The Island That Does Not Speak

The elders of Tragjas tell the story that, once upon a time, when Sazan had neither wires nor walls nor weapons, there lived in the village a maiden with eyes like the sea and a voice like the nightingale's. She fell in love with a foreign sailor who often came on a merchant ship anchored in the bay of Vlora. They met in secret among the thickets of Karaburun where she tended her flock.

But her family betrothed her to an older man from Dukat — a good man, they said. No one asked her opinion, no one listened to her. Upon learning that her marriage was being arranged against her will, she decided to flee with the man she loved. She wrote a letter and left it upon her pillow. One quiet June night, she boarded a small boat with her beloved and sailed to the island of Sazan.

Discovering that she was gone, her family raised the village in alarm. It was soon clear where the fugitives had gone — there was nowhere else to hide but on Sazan. The men gathered, took up arms and set out on their boats.

The young couple, weary from the voyage, had built a small shelter on a rocky ridge. They lit a small fire and fell asleep — free for the first time. But dawn never came for them. In the darkness, the men landed on the island, found the two asleep and killed them in utter silence, without a word. They buried them in a shallow pit, covered with white stones gathered from the shore. Then they returned, sealing what happened with a command: *"Never be it spoken of again."*

But words cannot be chained. Three weeks later, a shepherd boy from Tragjas swore he had seen a woman in a white dress standing on the highest peak of Sazan, gazing silently toward the mainland.

The next day, a sudden warm rain fell upon the island, though the sky utterly cloudless. It seemed as if the heavens were weeping. It was mid-July. Since then, whenever such a rain falls over Sazan in the heat of summer, the elders whisper, *"She is crying."*

And whenever rainless white clouds gather above the island, people murmur softly, "Sazan does not speak — for if it did, its words would cut straight into our souls."

Historical period:

Mythical and oral traditions about Sazan Island date back to the Illyrian and Roman periods (4th century BCE – 3rd century CE), though its reputation as a *"cursed"* or *"forbidden island"* took shape especially during the Ottoman era and was reinforced throughout the 20th century.

Historical overview of the period

In antiquity, Sazan served as a refuge for sailors and Roman soldiers, later becoming a strategic point controlling passages between the Adriatic and Ionian seas. Under Ottoman rule, the island remained largely uninhabited, reserved for military use. During the 20th century — first under the Kingdom of Albania and later under the Communist regime — Sazan was transformed into a heavily fortified military base, closed off to civilians. The legends of silence, disappearance and accursing grew as popular attempts to explain the *absence of life* in such a beautiful place.

Conditions that gave rise to the narrative

The island's long-standing isolation, the prohibition of access to ordinary citizens and the total lack of civil life turned Sazan into a space detached from the ordeals of time and people. It came to be perceived as the *"deaf island"* – devoid of sound, light or memory. This timeless silence, mingled with mystery and unexplained tales, gave rise to one of the most powerful figures of Albanian folklore – "the island that does not speak", a place that guards deep secrets and punishes those who dare to disturb it, whether in body or in spirit.

Message or symbolic meaning

The island of Sazan embodies the paradox of forbidden beauty — a paradise that cannot be touched. Its mixture of military history, political isolation and nature's wilderness has created a space decoupled, as it were, from human time. Legends surrounding the island reflect both fear and reverence for mysterious places and reveal the power of collective memory to protect untouched landscapes through myth.

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Mount Tomorr and *Baba Tomorr (Father Tomorr)*

In a time beyond the count of calendars, Mount Tomorr was not merely a mountain. It stood as a threshold between earth and word, between the human and the divine — a place where justice demanded no judge.

It is said that on the peak of Tomorr, where the clouds pause to breathe, there dwells Baba Tomorr [Father Tomorr], an ancient elder whose beard is white as the snow that not even the August sun can melt. No need for him to speak. No need for him to be seen. It suffices that he sees. And when he sees, his gaze pierces through time. Four vast-winged and sharp-eyed black eagles circle around him. They are his eyes and ears. When they glide silently, the world is at peace. Yet when they begin encircling the summit in eerie stillness, it is as if one can hear the bells of a coming curse and something grave stirring — an injustice, a broken *besa*, an offense against the sacred.

Baba Tomorr does not speak with words, but with storms that descend as punishment — with winds that roar through darkness, stones that break loose from the cliffs like the tears of an ancient wrath. He does not strike at once, but he never forgets.

Once, a wealthy and arrogant *bey* decided to build a tower atop the summit of Tomorr. He wished to rule "from above," to see every village, every man, every beast beneath him — to rise higher than the mountain's shadow, to carve his own name there where only God should tread. For a while, all seemed to go well. He had brought master builders, white stones and caravans climbing each day up the slopes.

But the spirit of the mountain did not approve of the undertaking. One night, the winds rose from all four directions. A black storm swallowed everything. Mist fell like a white shroud over the half-built tower.

By morning, the tower was gone — and so was the path that led there. No one could find the way again, though they had labored there for weeks. No trace remained from human deeds thereabouts. Then, it is said, Baba Tomorr finally spoke — his words still echoing through the ages: "No one shall raise a tower above my shadow."

Since that day, none has dared ascend the sacred peak with pride. All will climb but with reverence, no arrogance. This is not merely the tale of a foolish man but so also a reminder that boundless pride, injustice and contempt for the sacred never go unpunished.

Historical period: Identified as a sacred site since the 4th century BCE

Historical overview of the period

The belief in Mount Tomorr as a sacred place is ancient, with roots traceable to the 4th century BCE, when nature cults and mountain worship were widespread in Illyrian and pre-Roman lands of present-day Albania. This sacrality of the natural — the perception of mountain peaks as the dwelling of divine forces — endured across generations by way of adapting to successive belief systems. During early Christianity, such reverence merged into local devotional practices, whilst under Ottoman rule, through the spread of Bektashism, it became a site of institutionalized spiritual cult. In folk tradition, Tomorr was envisioned as the abode of a supernatural guardian who punished injustice and upheld moral order — embodied in the mythical figure of Baba Tomorr, the white-bearded patriarch surrounded by four eagles. This image, inherited from ancient cosmologies, symbolized the continuity of the mountain's holiness within collective memory.

With the rise of Bektashism in the 18th—19th centuries, this mythical sensibility crystallized around the cult of Baba Ali (Abaz Ali), one of the principal saints of the Bektashi order. The Teqe of Kulmak on Tomorr's slopes became one of the most important Bektashi pilgrimage sites in the Balkans. The blending of the popular myth of Baba Tomorr with the religious cult of Baba Ali stands as a rare example of coexistence between myth and institutionalized faith playing into the preservation of the mountain's sacrality as part of Albania's spiritual identity.

Conditions that gave rise to the belief

Tomorr is not just a mountain — it is a presence. Seen from afar, its lion-like silhouette sunken in the lofty clouds explains why, for millennia, people have projected the belief that a divine power dwells thereby. No sacred book was needed to consecrate it. Its very wild, serene and imposing nature inspired awe, respect and humility.

As in many ancient cultures, mountain summits in Albania were regarded as holy spaces. Yet Tomorr stood apart: it was not merely a seat of gods, but also a silent judge. People endowed it with a soul — protector of justice, guardian of *besa* and watcher of human deeds. When tempests struck, the wind lashed the valleys and stones tumbled without apparent cause, these happenings were not seen as accidents but as signs of divine retribution.

From this sensibility arose the figure of Baba Tomorr as the ancient white-bearded man encircled by four eagles. Over time, his image intertwined with Bektashi mysticism, merging into the veneration of Baba Ali. Yet at its heart of this sensibility lies the profoundly human belief that justice has a dwelling place and that the mountain is precisely that place.

To-the-day Mount Tomorr remains a major pilgrimage site, especially during the Feast of Baba Ali (20—25 August), when hundreds of families ascend its slopes to offer sacrifices, seek forgiveness, give thanks and renew their bond with the sacred.

Message

Mount Tomorr stands today not only as a spiritual emblem but also as a cultural and unifying symbol of Albanian identity. The annual rites held each year during the month of August stand as a living testament to interfaith coexistence and a shared heritage that has survived conquests, ideologies and divisions of kinds. Baba Tomorr has become a figure transcending religious and regional boundaries — a symbol of sacred land, moral order and enduring memory. For the Bektashi community, the site remains among the holiest centers of pilgrimage devoted to Baba Ali, while for many others, it is a mountain that speaks through its history, legends and silence. In an increasingly fragmented world, where the sacred risks being overshadowed by self-interest, Tomorr endures as a point of orientation and a mirror of what we have been and what we still aspire to be.

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Oath Upon the Stone – The Word That Cannot Be Broken

On a crisp morning, the youngest men of the village set out at the order of the council's elder to look for a stone. It had to be round, firm, no larger than a man's fist but not small so as to be prone to being lost. The stone would serve as the witness to an oath — the pledge of men who had just taken a decision vital to the fate of their entire *katund* (community). They had vowed to stand together against a foreign threat to their freedom. When the stone was found and brought with due care to the assembly, the *plaku i madh* (the eldest of the council) held it in his hand for a long moment, looking each man in the eyes. All stood in a semicircle, silent and solemn. Then he passed the stone to the first man on his left. That man placed it in the palm of his left hand, touched it with his right, and declared in a clear voice: "For the goodness of God, so may He help me, neither I nor any of my household shall ever break faith with the village." One by one, each man repeated the same formula. When the stone returned to the elder, he too swore upon it. Then, raising his hand high, he said: "He who breaks this oath, may his head break as I now release this stone." And he let the stone fall to the ground before the eyes of the assembly of men. From that moment, the stone was no longer ordinary. It carried the weight of *word, honor* and *besa*. It was kept in the elder's house as a sacred object. People would say, "This is no longer a mere stone — upon it an oath was sworn and it shall be guarded as a consecrated thing." To discard it or treat it carelessly was deemed a grave sin.

The *oath upon the stone* (*beja mbi gur*) was not used only for collective decisions. In many cases, it served as the ultimate act to prove an individual's innocence. A man accused of betrayal, falsehood or another grave offense could request to swear upon the stone to clear his name of the blemish. The oath was inviolable: if a man swore falsely, it was believed that within three days the earth itself would punish him. In Mirdita this practice took on an almost mystical dimension. The stone was not only a witness but considered a saint, as it were. In Albanian culture, the stone held a dual status as both a physical boundary and a sacred medium. Stones marked borders, graves, council grounds and, most importantly, oaths of honor. In regions such as Mirdita, Labëria and Dukagjini, "*gurët e besës*" (stones of the pledge) are still remembered as sites where historic oaths were made to end blood feuds, seal alliances or unite against foreign enemies.

Historical period:

An ancient Albanian tradition, documented since the 17th century, with much deeper oral and customary roots.

Historical overview

In the Albanian highlands, words were not mere sounds — they were acts. In the absence of written law, a spoken promise carried the weight of a sacred contract. Among all forms of oath, the most solemn was the "oath upon the stone," a practice deeply rooted in Albanian moral and customary life as the embodiment of truth, honor and justice. The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini recognizes this "*beja mbi gur*" as one of the most solemn and honorable oaths known to man, equal in sanctity to swearing upon the Gospel itself.

Conditions that gave rise to the practice

In a society where honor and manhood formed the foundation of authority, disputes, agreements and reconciliations required no judges but rather only witnesses: the men of the assembly and the earth that overheard them. The stone, as symbol of permanence and of the sacred bond between man and earth, served as the medium to ground the word and ensure it could never be undone. The oath was made with one's hand upon the stone, in the name of God and of the shame that would befall upon the perjurer.

Message

The *oath upon the stone* is not a mere custom, but a profound expression of Albanian moral culture — where justice, honor and community intertwine. It embodies collective conscience and the sacred will to preserve one's word as something inviolable. Through this ritual, speech transcended the personal and became a sacred debt owed to the earth and to others. Its consequences extended beyond this life into the next. The oath upon the stone forged one of the strongest links between man, land and honor. The oath was not simply a verbal act, but rather a wholesome commitment, a moral contract witnessed not just by people, but nature itself — earth, stone and sky. In a world where justice depended on faith rather than punishment, the "*beja mbi gur*" upheld the moral and social structure of communal life, making each man responsible for his word and deeds.

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"*Gjama*" – Men's Lament in Albania, The Voice of Grief and Honor

When the traveler named Dorian arrived at a village sewn into the slopes of the Albanian Alps, he did not know that he had stepped into another world — one where footsteps respect the past and the word of honor does not die with the body. He had come to photograph mountain landscapes for his archive, but instead of the views he awaited to open up to him, he suddenly heard a deep, rhythmic and trembling sound. It was the men's lament — "gjama e burrave". He did not ask anyone what was happening. All stood silent. From the upper road a line of men descended solemnly toward the courtyard of a house where the body of an honorable elder lay covered. At the entrance, the women sat apart, weeping quietly, while the men formed a circle and bowed slightly, each placing a hand on his chest. One man stepped forward, white-mustached, with deep eyes and a presence that spoke louder than words. There were no musical instruments or rehearsals and that was no spectacle. There was but voice. The first man began releasing rhythmical sounds that were neither a song nor a simple outcry. They were words that struck like stones blowing upon the chest of the still air. They were both a curse against death and a praise to life. "Ah man of the earth, you have fallen with great honor; you have torn our hearts, yet your trace shall not vanish from this soil!" One after another, the others joined in perfect rhythm, synchronizing not by virtue of rehearsal but rather custom, altogether forming a chorus lamenting an ancient sorrow. The traveler stood motionless. Even his camera dared not make a sound. He realized he was witnessing no mere mourning but a rare procession, a collective rite of manly grieving, a tradition emerged not to act out a drama of sorts but rather ensure that pain did not die with the body.

In northern Albania and also in Labëria, *gjama* was the only way men were allowed to lament. Tears were forbidden and their sorrow could not flow down their faces but instead rise through words hurled toward the sky. Their forefathers had set this rule: *men do not weep — they grieved like men.* The ritual had its own laws. *Gjama* was not performed for just anyone. It was reserved for men of integrity, wise, just and noble. The community decided in silence who was worthy of such an honor. It was the final tribute to a life lived righteously, with no word or *besa* ever broken. Everything unfolded with the gravity of an ancient procession. The men stood with hands on their chests or heads, as if restraining something mounting within and verging on gushing forth. At the peak of the lament, with voices united in their highest pitch, Dorian felt himself tremble — not from sadness, but from awe instilled by a culture that

had found a language of farewell that preserved dignity even in the face of overwhelming grief. When it was over, no one spoke. The men sat on nearby stones, drank a small glass of raki in silence and then departed. They had done their part. They had carried their fellow brother beyond — *with voice.* The traveler turned to an old man and asked, "What was that?" The elder looked at him calmly and said, "That was the last word — but heavier than all others. What the mouth can no longer say, the *gjama* says."Today, many of these laments are no longer heard — the young having left the hearth and modern funerals replacing ancestral rites. Yet in remote villages, when a man of honor dies, six or seven men will still rise together, shaking the air with their voices. *Gjama* is not merely sound — it is the soul rising and resounding in final glory.

Historical period:

An ancient practice, clearly documented from the 18th to the mid-20th century.

Historical overview

In Albania's patriarchal society, especially in the North and Labëria, pain, honor and death were events laden with deep social meaning. Within this context developed gjama, a male-exclusive collective form of lament — neither song nor cry, but a structured, rhythmic and ceremonial outpouring. It gave men a legitimate and honorable way to express grief in societies where public tears were forbidden. Beyond mourning, *gjama* served as a moral message celebrating integrity, courage and continuity. It affirmed the deceased's reputation and reminded the living of the values binding the community together.

Conditions that gave rise to the practice

In the absence of formal rituals or written culture, *gjama* emerged as a collective emotional outlet — a way to channel grief with dignity, discipline and shared participation. It allowed men to manifest affection and loss while preserving the composure demanded by the moral codes of the time.

Message

Gjama is not merely a lament but a ceremony of remembrance and respect — a voice that binds community, morality and emotion into a single act. It transforms grief into continuity, turning pain into collective strength. Through *gjama*, Albanian men found a dignified way to express emotion without surrendering to it. It is a testament to balance — between restraint and expression, sorrow and honor — and anb enduring reminder that even silence can have a voice.

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The Toast (*Dollia*) – A Blessing Raised in the Cup

Have you heard of the Albanian toast — *dollia*? You should know it is not merely the lifting of a glass, but a ritual of honor whereby *raki* (or another traditional drink) is accompanied with words of goodwill and respect uttered as a blessing of the soul.

From the first words of welcome to the solemn wishes for the family's fortune, *dollia* follows an unwritten yet perfectly understood order among those who partake. The host raises the first glass, followed by the guest, always with accompanying reverence and gracious words. There is no room for offense, but rather only for honor, remembrance and gratitude. It reflects the Albanians' deep affection and respect toward one another. So powerful is the moment of *dollia* between host and guests that a foreigner might marvel at the warmth and dignity outpoured in a single night of shared toasts. A unique tradition not to be found elsewhere. In the district of Gramsh this custom takes on a particularly national symbolism. The host always closes the toast with the words: "We raise this toast [otherwise called "health"] for the Flag. Long may it live and wave!" At that moment, all present rise and respond in unison: "Always in the hands of the Albanian!" This rare ritual, preserved only in Gramsh, is a symbolic act uniting household honor with national honor. The Flag, sanctified at the heart of the toast, becomes the highest emblem of unity, loyalty and Albanian pride.

The *dollia* ancient ritual survives most vividly and solemnly in the region of Skrapar, where it has its own laws passed faithfully from generation to generation.

It is said that, long ago, during a harsh winter in the mountains of Skrapar laying buried in snow, a stranger knocked on the door of a remote house. The master of the home, as custom dictated, welcomed him and set the table. When the men gathered around the *raki*, the host raised his glass: "For the guest we do not yet know — but whose heart, through words, shall soon be revealed"... "I have found you o friend!" and "May goodness find you!" replied the guest and glasses were then raised one toast after the other.

That night, in the rounds of toasts for parents, grandparents and departed ones, an old memory rekindled like a flame beneath the ashes: their grandfathers had once served together as soldiers (*nizamë*) in far away in Anatolia. Amidst exhaustion in battles, they had shared bread and water, as so wounds, sealing between them a brotherhood of blood.

The younger men had not known this link, but the *dollia*'s warm words and the *raki* that stirs reminiscences

had brought it back to life. That night forged a friendship that would endure forever: this was no unknown guest, but an old friend whom the road had merely delayed on its way to reaching the host.

Since that evening, every year on the same date, the two families raise a toast in memory of that first *dollia* that bound them through shared roots and inherited honor.

This story, found in many variations across Albania, carries an enduring truth: the Albanian toast is not merely a good wish. It is a bridge between hearts, a memory revived through the cup, a promise flowing from generation to generation. In the rhythm and musicality of *dollia's* speech there resides the honor of a people lifting the cup wholeheartedly and giving blessing from within the soul.

Historical period:

As old as life itself — still vibrantly practiced today.

Historical overview

The tradition of the *dollia* across Albanian lands is rooted in an ancient worldview where speech and drink — especially *raki* — were sacred elements of hospitality. In patriarchal Albanian society, the table was governed by unwritten laws of honor, faith and respect for the guest. Within this setting, the toast was not just a prelude or conclusion to a shared meal, but rather a solemn moment of recognition and honoring of friendship, family, warriors, departed ones and life itself. By the 18th—19th centuries, especially in southern Albania, *dollia* had become a structured social code, transmitted through generations. After the 20th century, sociopolitical changes and Albania's engagement in international cultural organizations brought *dollia* under the researchers' focus and eventually its recognition as an element of intangible spiritual heritage.

Conditions that gave rise to the practice

Albanians have long been known for their deep sense of hospitality and their reverence for the spoken word. In societies where moral law outweighed written law, one's word carried immense weight. In this moral landscape, the appearance of *dollia* as a solemn, act intertwining drinking —blessing and good wishing — fulfilled the need to maintain social harmony and ethical order. It emerged from collective relationships of

traditional life, where every public act, even the lifting of a cup, bore not of social or festive value but was in fact imbued with profound ethical meaning.

Message

The *dollia* is an expression of Albanian ethics of hospitality. It shows how Albanians have honored the spoken word, friendship and life through organized and solemn gestures. When the Albanian raises the glass, it is not a simple act of drinking, for it is also an act of prayer, honoring and remembrance. To-the-day *dollia* remains a living part of social life — at weddings, gatherings and everyday meetings. Though modern life brings new forms of communication, its tone and essence remain unchanged. Among particular Albanian communities abroad, *dollia* represents a living bond with cultural roots and efforts are underway to protect it as part of Albania's intangible spiritual heritage. In a world that grows ever faster and more fragmented, the Albanian toast continues to be a receptacle of warmth, solidarity, honor and blessings for life.

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The Dragon and the *Kulshedra* – The Eternal Battle of Mythical Forces in Mirdita

In the village of Mushtë, in the region of Mirdita, legend tells of a young Dragon born into a humble family of shepherds. Though seemingly an ordinary child, from an early age he showed signs of the extraordinary: he laughed only when the rain poured down, moved stones that grown men could not lift, and always slept with his face turned towards the mountain. When the Kulshedra awoke from the caves of Gomsiqe and began to devour the clouds — unleashing lightning storms and hail upon the crops of Orosh — the villagers gathered in fear and counsel. An old man, wise in the ways of the ancestors, said, "The time has come. The Dragon will know on his own when the moment arrives." And verily it so happened. During one night when the sky grew darker than ever it had ever before, the Dragon climbed the mountain facing the cave and called the *Kulshedra* by name."Do not destroy the land of my people!" he cried. The *Kulshedra* emerged — swollen, her hair dragging the clouds, her tongues of fire swallowing the darkness. She hurled storms, but the Dragon stood his ground, leaning upon a heavy plowshare, which he wielded as a spear. In the final moment, the legend says, lightning split the sky and struck the *Kulshedra* — the Dragon's hand guiding the bolt toward her lair thus sealing her doom. In Mushtë, they say that on a sharp cliff above the valley, one can still see "the Dragon's Footprint", a strange mark shaped to the likeness of a human foot. In Gomsiqe, there is "the Dragon's Stone", the place where he rested for the last time before setting out on his eternal battle.

In other parts of northern Albania (especially in Pukë and Tropojë) the Dragon may appear as a bird or a ram with wings of fire, while the *Kulshedra* may take the form of a woman hiding among rocks or underground springs. In Dibra e Madhe, people say the *Kulshedra* is a woman with long braids who appears before great floods and vanishes the moment the Dragon rises upon the trembling oaks, heralding the storm's end. Scholars have compared these legends to Indo-European mythical models of "the hero who slays the monster," noting that the Albanian version preserves more archaic pagan elements, especially in Mirdita, where the oral accounts remain rich, complete and less influenced by later reinterpretations.

Historical period:

From pre-Christian times through the 20th century, rooted in the mythological worldview of ancient Albanian pagan beliefs.

Historical overview

In the oral tradition of Mirdita and other northern regions, profound mythological narratives have survived from an ancient world where nature represented not a mere a background to life, but a moving power and oftentimes threatening. Two figures embody this worldview more than any others — the *Kulshedra* and the Dragon. These opposing mythical beings symbolize the fundamental duality of existence: destructive evil versus protective good. The Kulshedra, a fierce and voracious creature, brings storms, hail, floods and landslides, endangering human life and livelihood. Opposite her stands the Dragon — the mythical hero, usually a male figure, who rises to defend life, the land and natural order.

Conditions that gave rise to the myth

The harsh mountain terrain, the struggle for survival amid extreme climates and human's total dependence on the forces of nature transformed myth into a vital form of explanation and solace. In these circumstances, the people of northern Albania imagined the world's conflicts — storms, floods, earthquakes — as the workings of the Kulshedra, a being of cursed and supernatural powers. Against this destructive force, they envisioned a protector — the Dragon — a being not always divine but born among humans, taking the form of a child, a man, a bird or else a ram, endowed with extraordinary powers by nature itself. He became the embodiment of justice, representing hope and the courage to confront evil.

Message

The battle between the Dragon and the Kulshedra stands as an metaphor for the eternal struggle between good and evil, between the community's protective strength and the forces of destruction stemming from nature or coming from the outside world. This mythology taught that evil is never invincible and that it can be faced through courage, sacrifice and connection to the land and community. Today, the legends of the Dragon and the Kulshedra are not mere echoes of the past, but a living heritage carrying deep cultural

and educational values. They help reinforce local identity and inspire appreciation for Albanian mythology, while also promoting cultural tourism, especially in regions like Mirdita, where such legends live on through toponyms, folklore and collective memory.

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Flija – The Taste of Tradition and Northern Albanian Hospitality

On a winter's day, when the sky grows heavy with thick clouds and snow begins to fall softly, in a mountain home of Kukës, the preparation of *flija* begins. The oda — the main family room — is warmed by the fire alight since the early morning and around the hearth there gather the women of the household. On one side lies the dough thinned with water and a pinch of salt, while on the other, butter and cream are ready. The process is given a start by the eldest woman of the house. With her experienced hands, she spreads the first thin layer onto the iron *saç* heated over glowing embers. She does not rush for each layer needs its own time, its own patience, its own care. As the layers bake one atop the other, conversation flows easily. The women recall old times, hum forgotten songs and share stories from everyday life. The children, sitting nearby, listen in silence, hoping for a tale or the gentle touch of a grandmother's hand. The aroma of melting butter fills the house, carrying with it a sense of warmth, togetherness and safety. This is not merely a day of cooking, it is a day of communion. When the *flija* is finally ready, it is not served right away. The guest, if any is present, takes the first bite. Otherwise, the eldest of the household will be the one to taste it first, uttering a blessing for health and prosperity. Then, the dish is divided carefully among all. There are no distinctions, for every slice is equal — often accompanied by fresh yogurt, cheese, jam or honey, depending on each person's taste.

Though Kukës preserves one of the purest and most traditional forms of *flija*, in regions such as Tropoja, Has or Puka, women may add an egg to the dough or vary the method of baking. Some serve it with jam, others with boiled milk. Yet the essence remains the same: *flija* is a food that demands time, patience and love — love for the guest, for the family, for life itself.

Historical period:

From early historical times to the present day, flourishing particularly during the 19th—20th centuries.

Historical overview

In the highlands of Kukës, where snow descends early and lingers until late in the spring, with roads vanishing under the white cover and where the solitude of winter deepens human bonds, traditions arose that kept alive the spirit of community. In this rugged landscape where life demands endurance and resilience, there took shape one of the most emblematic dishes of Albanian heritage: flija. Made from the simplest ingredients yet prepared with devotion, *flija* is far more than food. It is an expression of generosity, hospitality and domestic warmth — a mirror of the northern Albanian soul.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

Life in Kukës and across northern Albania has never been easy. The cold climate, mountainous terrain and long periods of isolation fostered a lifestyle rooted in self-reliance and communal support. Every resource was used wisely. Flour, butter and cream — staple products of any household — became the foundations of *flija*. Other than its simple ingredients, it is the method of preparation that gives *flija* its unique character and imbues it with meaning. *Flija* was not an everyday meal; it was reserved for special occasions — weddings, feasts and the arrival of a rare and honored guests.

Message

Flija is not just a dish — it is a symbol. It is a test of patience, requiring hours of attentive work. It is a gesture of hospitality, prepared not for everyone, but for those who matter. It is an act of care, each layer spread by hand, with thought and tenderness, to make the guest feel welcome. In a society enduring hardships and sweeping changes, *flija* has persisted as a form of cultural resilience — a proof that beauty can arise from simplicity. It stands as a reminder that tradition lives not only in rituals or monuments, but also in the warmth of a shared meal.

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The Flutes of Gramsh and the Story of Tana

Tana, the only daughter of a wealthy farmer, had fallen in love with a poor shepherd — her family's hired hand. When word reached her father's ears, he refused to believe it. To test his daughter, he asked her to bring bread to the shepherd and secretly followed her.

The young man, seeing from afar that his beloved was being watched, took his flute and began to play, singing softly:

"Tana, my fair Tana!
Hang the bread upon the hawthorn tree,
For your father is near."

It was a call for silence, a plea to hide their love. The girl understood and called out from a distance: "O shepherd of the mountain! Come, take your bread by the hawthorn tree!"

These words convinced her father that she did not love the shepherd.

Some time later, a band of thieves surprised the shepherd at his sheepfold and bound him near the pasture. He pleaded with them to have at least one of his hands freed so he could play his flute. Amused, they agreed and went on their way.

Soon, the sounds of the flute and song spread across the hills. Tana heard it too. The shepherd sang:

"Tana, my poor Tana!
Wake your father, let him gather the men,
For they have bound the shepherd,
The sheep are near the elder trees,
The black dog is slain,
Two rams taken to the spit —
Wake your father, let him raise the alarm!"

Hearing this, Tana ran to her father and cried:

"Rise, father, call the men!
The shepherd is bound,
The sheep are near the elder trees!"

Her father and the village men rushed to the scene and freed the shepherd. The old man then turned to the youth:
— "Do you love my daughter?"
— "More than life itself," the shepherd replied.
— "Then may you be bound together for life," said the father, tying their hands with a white handkerchief.

By joining their hands, the daughter's father sealed their union. With one of his hands bound, the shepherd could no longer play his flute — nor did he need to, for love had been granted. The flute had fulfilled its purpose. An instrument no longer giving sound to longing, thereby becoming a symbol of sacrifice that made love possible and saved life.

Historical period:

An oral and instrumental heritage surviving from antiquity to the present (undated); the story of Tana dates to the 19th century.

Historical overview

The region of Gramsh preserves one of the rarest and most authentic expressions of Albanian folk heritage — the flute (*fyell*) as instrument, craftsmanship, language of communication and spiritual symbol. In this mountainous landscape, where daily life was bound to shepherding, nature and the rhythms of community life, the flute was not just an instrument but the very voice of human emotions — as distant calls and echo of joy, pain, love and longing.

In the 19th century's society featuring sharp divides by wealth and status, love often collided with kin honor — and the flute, as a silent messenger, remained as the one voice that could speak when speech was forbidden. The Legend of Tana and the Shepherd took root in this setting, a tale elevating the flute as a medium enabling an act of redeeming and a symbol of fidelity.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

In a world where class-based social boundaries were strict and the rich man's daughter could not love the poor shepherd, the flute became an invisible bridge between two hearts. In the shepherd's hands, it was not just a musical tool but the voice of solitude, the witness of thought and emotion, and the companion of the soul on the mountainside. In the highlands of Gramsh — where man and nature are one — the flute linked the shepherds to the world as to the self. It gave sound to the stillness of pastures, gathered the

scattered flocks, whispered hidden loves and unspoken sorrows. The shepherd played not to be heard, but to communicate with the unseen — with love, with hope, with the spirit of the land that answered him through the wind. Through this silent yet profound bond, the flute became the shepherd's second identity — an extension of his breath, still echoing across the valleys of Gramsh. Yet it also had practical uses: it could warn of danger, signal across hills or carry messages between shepherds.

Gramsh still preserves rare craftsmanship in flute-making, along with a rich pastoral repertoire of melodies that roll through its deep valleys. It is within this cultural landscape that the story of Tana and "the flute that speaks" was born and passed down through generations.

Message

The flute of Gramsh is not merely an ancient folk instrument. It represents an eternal language — one that speaks of love, faith, unspoken feelings and the soul's power to transcend words. In Tana's story, it becomes a voice of rescue, an echo of forbidden love and a testament of loyalty in a society where the free word was often silenced. In daily life, the flute served as a bridge among shepherds, a signal of danger, a song of longing and a call of affection.

But the deeper message of this heritage is that in a society divided by gender, class and lineage, the flute of Gramsh recognized no boundaries. It could belong to anyone wishing to dedicate his breath, infuse his feelings and the cherish the will to speak through sound what could not be said in speech. In the shepherd's humble hand, the flute gained a sacred force — becoming the voice of truth, the witness of emotion and the affirmation of shared humanity.

The fact that the Flutes of Gramsh have been proclaimed a *"National Masterpiece of Albania's Intangible Cultural Heritage"* is not simply an institutional fact, but rather a recognition of this spiritual treasure surviving centuries of silence, living on in the hands of Gramsh's flute masters and the countless generations giving them the breath of life.

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The Tower of Confinement – The Silent Wait for Justice

One afternoon in springtime, a word misunderstood — between two young men, distant cousins from different clans — ended in tragedy. One of them, Gjeto, shot the other during a quarrel over grazing boundaries. It was not a premeditated act, yet according to the Kanun, it struck the opening of a blood feud. From that moment, Gjeto could no longer return home. The victim's clan was known for its honor and discipline, but also for its severity. Within hours, the elders of both families would gather in council to set the first terms of *besa* — the temporary truce that prevented immediate revenge. According to custom, it was decided that Gjeto should surrender unarmed and go to the Tower of Confinement (*Kulla e Ngujimit*), where one who had "opened blood" was held. Escorted by loyal young men from his clan, Gjeto entered the tower with bowed head and without a word, as tradition demanded. From that moment on, he was confined. He could not step outside, take part in village life, work the land, or attend weddings and funerals. Only women were allowed to move freely nearby outside the *kulla*, fetching him bread and water. Confinement could last for months or even years, though in practice the stay inside the tower rarely exceeded 10—15 days, long enough for the elders to reach a decision. Once judgment was given, the accused had but three-days time to take leave from thereabouts.

Gjeto awaited in silence. Each day felt like a lifetime, for life in confinement was like a single day that never ended. Meanwhile, the elders continued their investigation — had it been murder or self-defense? Every detail mattered for the final verdict. When it was finally determined that the killing had been unintentional — the result of a trivial dispute — the elders initiated a process of reconciliation. Visits to the victim's family were frequent. At first, words were not well received, but time, sorrow and the mediation of respected men softened the pain. One morning, the victim's family agreed to come to the tower for a final encounter. In the middle of the *oda*, as tradition dictated, a cradle was placed — with a baby tied face down, a symbol of innocence and of life endangered by conflict of adults. The child could have been Gjeto's or perhaps a nephew of his. No one could look at a child in that state without feeling shaken. The elders turned to the patriarch of the victim's clan and asked: "Will you forgive this newborn — or let the child die?" It was the moment of truth in the heart of a man, when honor and humanity stood face to face. After a tense silence, the old man rose and turned the cradle upright. That gesture alone meant that the blood was forgiven. To seal the act, a ritual of reconciliation followed... sometimes the elder would cut a lock of the child's hair, becoming his godfather... sometimes, the two men would drink from the same cup bearing wine mixed

with drops of blood, in a ritual known as the *"Brotherhood of the Finger."*

From that day, Gjeto could leave the tower. Life would never be the same, but he was no longer a prisoner, no longer hunted. The wound was closed and coexistence had been preserved in a community whose people quarreled and cared for one another sharing the same mountain, the same fields and often the same bloodline. The Kanun did not promote revenge — it sought to regulate it within the boundaries of honor and truce (*besa*). It left no space for blind vengeance or endless bloodshed. Killing required a response, but that response had to weighted through wisdom, leaving open the path toward forgiveness. The Kanun offered a form of communal justice in the absence of the state, and for centuries it was the only system guaranteeing order and stability in the remote northern highlands. In this context, the Tower of Confinement was not a symbol of fear, but of traditional law. The elders served as judges, the guards as police, and the tower itself was both court and prison. In the absence of modern institutions, this system functioned with authority and moral weight — and was respected by all.

Historical period: 15th—20th centuries

Historical overview

In northern Albania, for centuries, order was not guaranteed by the state, but by an unwritten legal code transmitted across generations — the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini. Later compiled by Father Shtjefën Gjeçovi, the Kanun was more than a set of laws: it was a way of life, a comprehensive system of traditional justice that governed every aspect of existence in the highlands, spanning from family relations and property division to the punishment of serious crimes. Within this framework, the Tower of Confinement held a central function. It was not a refuge for the guilty, but a space where time stood still, whilst justice was sought not through violence but through patience, silence and endurance. The tower served as a form of traditional pre-trial custody for the perpetrator of a killing or for members of his family, thereby preventing retaliation until the elders could deliberate and pronounce judgment.

Conditions that gave rise to the practice

In a society where blood feuds were part of the code of honor (meticulously regulated by the Kanun) confinement provided a way to suspend vengeance and open space for mediation. After a killing, respected

elders were called to investigate the circumstances and determine whether the blood was "just" or had been shed unjustly, in which case reconciliation had to be sought. The offender would surrender unarmed and be escorted to the tower, guarded by trusted young men. His stay there, in silence and isolation, was a sign of accepting responsibility and readiness to face justice according to the Kanun.

Message

The Tower of Confinement embodies a form of traditional Albanian justice built on restraint, accountability and respect for communal norms. It was not a site of revenge, but a space to halt violence. It did not glorify bloodshed, but sought to contain it through law, dialogue and honor code. Today, as modern legal institutions are firmly established and blood feuds are rejected as remnants of the past, the tower remains a monument of historical and moral memory. It speaks to younger generations of a time when justice was pursued with honesty, but often at the cost of years of solitude and silent atonement. Visiting a tower such as the one in Theth is a journey back to a world where a man's word carried weight and honor was valued above life itself.

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Legend: "The Bride's Hollow in the Canyon of Osum"

It is said that one spring day, a wedding caravan was traveling through the canyon along a route known as much for its beauty as for its peril. At its heart rode the bride: dressed in white laces, adorned with silver jewelry that shimmered in the afternoon light and crowned with a wreath of fresh roses. She smiled shyly, marveling at the grandeur of the canyon she was gazing for the first time. But the journey was suddenly interrupted. A horseman arrived bearing an order from the local *pasha*: the bride was to be brought to him immediately. He had heard of her beauty and, like many a woman prior, had decided to make her his own. Her husband could do nothing, nor could her parents. Silence fell over the caravan, now transformed from a procession of joy into a cortege of sorrow. The bride asked for one final request. She stepped away, walking alone toward a ledge of the canyon where the cliff faced the sky. At the edge, she raised her eyes upward, pressed her forehead to the earth, and whispered: "If the earth will receive me, I shall never know dishonor. If it does not, then I am lost forever." Then she leapt. In that moment, the earth did not break — it softened. At the place where she fell, a round hollow opened in the rock, a perfect void at the heart of the cliff, from which water began to drip, like an eye that weeps eternally. The water has never dried, not even in summer. And upon that spot, no grass has ever grown. Locals say that there dwells the spirit of the bride who rejected power, who feared no tyrant, and who chose honor and love over life itself. If you stop and look toward that place, you may hear a soft whisper: "Do not touch me with sin."

To this day, no villager of Skrapar passing by will sing or laugh. They walk in silence, in reverence for a life lost and a soul that could not be broken.

Historical period:

18th–19th centuries, with earlier roots in the oral-mythical traditions of the Skrapar region and in the archetype of the "martyr bride" found across Balkan folklore.

Historical overview

During the Ottoman era, when the mountainous region of Skrapar remained on the margins of the imperial's power reach, local authority was often exercised by *bejlerë* and *agallarë*, feudal lords who wielded unchecked control over the rural population. Society was sharply divided: the peasants upholding honor

and word, while the administrative class embodying arbitrariness and abuse. In this context, the Osum Canyon was not just a passageway but indeed a sanctuary of resistance and survival. Among its stones, winds and hidden waters stories were born, defying silence and whispering that honor is stronger than fear and that the Albanian woman, even when powerless, could still be invincible.

Conditions that gave rise to the legend

The canyon's dramatic geography, combined with the deeply rooted tradition of protecting a woman's honor, created the perfect ground for a legend of this kind. With its vertical cliffs and the deep, winding flow of the Osum River, the canyon seems carved to contain both tragedy and transcendence. In a world where a woman risked everything rather than lose her honor, the story of the bride who "saved her soul by sacrificing her body" became a silent cult of morality and courage. The hollow that formed in the rock after her leap is not seen as a mere natural phenomenon, but as a divine sign — that nature itself accepted her sacrifice and transformed it into eternity.

Message

This legend is a silent manifesto of female courage, of sacrifice for an ideal and of the refusal of violence. In a time when many women's voices could not be heard, this bride spoke through a sublime act of freedom: self-sacrifice for dignity. The Bride's Hollow is not merely a geological formation — it is a spiritual monument. Today, as violence against women persists in different forms, this tale interweaves tradition and social conscience. It teaches that moral integrity and courage of women know no era and that dignity transcends time. Thus, the Bride's Hollow is not just a tourist destination, but a place of silent pilgrimage.

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Albanian Folk Games – A Living Memory of Joy and Tradition

In one of Tirana's neighborhoods, the wide courtyard of Grandfather Vathi's house was the favorite gathering place for all the children, especially during the long summer holidays. Grandfather Vathi, with his white mustache and sharp sense of humor, was known for the delightful stories he told. He always sat beneath the shade of an old fig tree, watching with a warm smile as his grandchildren and their friends played their games. One warm July afternoon, after the sun had softened its rays, a group of children and teenagers gathered once more in the courtyard. It was time for their favorite game, which they called *"Raqe raqe – hip e zdrip"* (*Raqe raqe – mount and step down*). Grandfather stepped down from the veranda, took a small hawthorn branch, drew a circle on the ground and then told the children to cast the lots. Two teams were quickly formed, six players each. Every team wrote its secret number on the ground, covering it so the other would not see. After a few moments of laughter and whispers on the team's strategy, Genti's guessed the others' number correctly and that qualified them to start the game as the riders. The opposing group formed the "human horse." Ardian, the tallest boy, bent forward and braced his shoulder on the shoulder of his teammate Erjon standing with this back against the stone wall of the courtyard — thereby becoming the "pillow" of the game. One after another, the rest lined up behind them, creating a long, sturdy chain.

Then came the most exciting part. The riders, laughing and teasing each other, secretly chose a number that would challenge the "horse." One by one, they leapt onto the backs of their friends, trying hard not to fall or touch the ground. The tension rose with each jump — and so did the bursts of laughter every time someone lost balance. When all the riders were up, Genti, the leader, raised his hand and shouted: *"Raqe raqe ki ki ko, how many fingers do I show?"* He lifted four fingers in secret. Ardian, struggling under the weight, frowned in concentration while his teammates whispered their guesses. Finally, taking a deep breath, he said the number *four*.

The courtyard erupted in cheers and laughter. His team had guessed correctly. The sides switched places and the game began anew — bursting with good-natured teasing and joy. Grandfather Vathi, watching the scene, could not help but laugh along. The game reminded him of his own youth, when he and his friends played the same game beneath the shade of a great walnut tree. At the end, as sweat ran down their faces and their eyes gleamed with delight, the old man told them that in the days of his youth playing had been even harder for children often played barefoot and every pebble would be felt beneath their feet.

Historical period:

Passed down from generation to generation, clearly documented during the 19th—20th centuries.

Historical overview

Albanian folk games are a vivid testimony to a rich and creative culture accompanying entire generations. In the absence of modern toys or advanced technology, Albanian children and youth invented games played in open spaces — be those courtyards of homes, green meadows or the narrow lanes of villages and small towns. These games were not merely a pass time, but a means of cultivating social bonds and cooperation, as also physical and mental agilities.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

In traditional Albanian society, children spent their time together outdoors, using imagination and creativity to invent games that required little or no equipment. These activities were both playful and formative, teaching the youngsters about social roles, teamwork and resilience.

Message

The game *"Raqe raqe – hip e zdrip"* stands as a clear expression of shared joy, emphasizing team spirit, cooperation and solidarity among participants. It shows how simplicity and imagination can create moments of lasting happiness and strengthen community ties. In modern times, as digital entertainment dominates children's free hours, preserving and promoting traditional folk games gains ever more importance. They offer a joyful and educational way to reconnect younger generations with the healthy values of friendship, play and life in nature.

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The Dance of Osman Taka – An Act of Freedom in the Shadow of Death

It is the last summer of the 19th century. In the courtyard of the Vali's palace in Ioannina, the ground trembled not from the collapsing of empire but from such steps that would change a life and even defy the very notion of justice of the time. Surrounded by soldiers, officials and fellow townspeople, among them relatives of the Vali himself, there walked a young man from Konispol, dark-haired and steady-eyed. His name was Osman Taka, an Albanian from the region of Çamëria, condemned to death. He walked with calm and measured steps, akin to a man not going to the gallows raised in the town's middle but rather a wedding. His gaze wandered toward the distant mountains. His story begins earlier, in the quiet villages of Çamëria. According to oral tradition, Osman's unmarried sister had been assaulted by Ottoman soldiers. Bound by the code of honor of his place and time, Osman could not remain silent. He avenged her and killed those who had violated what was sacred. He was pursued, captured and brought before the empire's justice. The sentence was severe: death by hanging. Yet Ottoman law preserved one ancient custom of lenience for the condemned could ask for a final wish. Osman Taka, in a calm and resolute voice, said: "I wish to dance — my dance. Once more, before I die."

The Vali looked at him, at first in astonishment, then in curiosity. It was no ordinary request. It was granted. Drums and flutes were brought, while other dancers from Konispol who happened to be thereabouts were called in. When the first steps struck the ground, silence fell over the courtyard. Osman Taka began his dance with extraordinary grace. There was nothing ordinary about his movements for he did not dance like a man facing death, but like a spirit newly born. With every step, he rose above pain and fear. When he knelt in the middle of the circle and bent backward, his head touching the earth, his chest opened. Another dancer, following tradition, placed a foot gently upon his chest — a gesture symbolizing both the weight of oppression and the endurance of those who does not yield. All thought the dance had ended. But then, with the lightness of breath itself, Osman Taka rose ever slowly, leaning only on one hand. Like a flower blooming from the soil after the storm. Like a people rising from ruins. Like a man who, though crushed, is reborn through beauty.

The Vali was speechless. His family sat in awe. Then his wife spoke first: "A man who dances like this cannot be hanged." The words spread like the wind. Even those who had lost kin by his hand felt that he was no murderer, but a soul who could heal through dance. Finally, stern but fair, the Vali stood up and declared:

"This man shall not die today. He shall live — to dance again, and so that we may remember not his blood, but the light he has given us." And so it was. Osman Taka returned to Konispol. He spoke little. But on nights when the full moon hovers over the sea of Butrint and the wind carries whispers from the mountains of Çamëria, the young men of the village still perform his dance. Its rhythm going beyond movement, weaving a story and a life redeemed by beauty. His house still stands... ruined, yet proud. No plaque, no monument... only memory... Every year, when the youth are brought into learning the Dance of Osman Taka, they learn the timeless truth that, at times, dance is stronger than death.

Historical period:

Late 19th century (*Rilindja Kombëtare* – the National Renaissance).

Historical overview

In the second half of the 19th century, while Albania remained under Ottoman rule, Albanians began to organize more consciously for national freedom and cultural identity. This was the era of the National Renaissance, a multifaceted movement that was not only political or educational, but also profoundly social and spiritual. It was a time of flourishing for the Albanian language, literature and cultural expression. This was a golden age for the diffusion of the Albanian language through written works, the demanding of national rights, the opening of schools in the Albanian language and the organization of national resistance against injustices of the Ottoman empire administration.

Folk culture — songs, dances, legends — provided not merely entertainment but powerful means of survival, national awareness and resistance. It was the voice of a people who, though politically oppressed, continued to affirm their dignity and identity through artistic and symbolic expression.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

According to oral tradition from Çamëria, Osman Taka was renowned for his courage, dignity and free spirit. The popular tale recounts that he was arrested and sentenced to death by Ottoman authorities after avenging a grave injustice against his family in an act considered at the time a moral duty for restoring honor. Before his execution, he invoked the right to a final wish and asked to dance his Çam dance. What

followed was not simply a farewell ritual, but a manifestation of life and beauty in defiance of death. The dance — with its slow, solemn kneeling gestures and graceful rises — was perceived by the spectators as a wordless prayer, a plea for life through art and dignity. The powerful emotions deeply moved those present, including the Vali's family, leading to the pardoning of Osman Taka. The dance he performed, now bearing his name, entered Albanian collective memory not merely as folklore, but as a testimony to the power of the human spirit and beauty to overcome violence and mortality.

Message

The Dance of Osman Taka is more than a jewel of Albanian folklore — it is a living testament to the spiritual resistance of the Albanians of Çamëria, who defended their family and national honor in the face of injustice. Born in the dark times when the Ottoman Empire sought to suppress all signs of dissent, this dance became a symbol of non-military triumph and of the victory of the soul. Osman Taka of Konispol achieved immortality not through the sword, but through art. Within the broader epic of Çam suffering, his dance acquires meanings beyond remembrance and becomes the embodiment of a people's pride — graceful yet unbroken, untouched by oppression or later ethnic persecution. Today, the Dance of Osman Taka reminds new generations not only of their ancestors' artistic heritage but also of the enduring drama of a people still seeking justice.

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The Mosque of Gjin Aleksi – A Bridge of Faith Between Eras

In Delvina, a town scarred by long wars for freedom and survival, there once lived a man named Gjin Aleksi. He did not seek glory, yet impressed deeply. A local leader, a Christian by faith and passionately devoted to the soil of his ancestors, Gjin Aleksi was a man who built when others destroyed.

It is said that he labored to raise two churches — those of Rusan and Papuçia. It is also said that though he spoke little, his words carried weight. During that time, construction carried a meaning far greater than one might today imagine, for a well-placed stone could stand for centuries. But not long after, another more imposing power would encroach upon Albania's territories: the Ottomans. They came not merely as conquerors, but also as bearers of a new order founded upon foreign laws and a foreign faith. Many who had until then prayed in churches now faced a difficult choice: leaving their homeland or else adapting to this new religion. Some abandoned their churches and others conformed. According to local oral tradition, Gjin Aleksi resolved not to leave the fate of his people in the hands of strangers. He accepted the new faith, yet that was not a renouncing in spirit. He resolved that as he had once built for Christians, he would now for Muslims — not out of devotion to the Sultan or in pursuit of wealth, but out of responsibility toward his people. That morning, having made his decision, Gjin Aleksi descended to the village square, where the men awaited him. His words were few but firm: "I am not changing neither the memory of our forefathers, nor that of my homeland. I am changing only the way I will defend this land. Here, where we once built for the soul, we shall build again — a new house of the prayer for this new time. But the stones will be ours, and my name will remain above the gate. Are you with me?"

Old Lekë, who had raised three sons in that same neighborhood, lifted his head and spoke slowly, almost whispering, yet his words clearly reaching all present: "And you, Gjin — will you pray with us?" He answered: "I will pray that this land never curses us — that we never forget who we are, even when our appearance changes. I will be with you. But this is not a man's promise — it is the promise of our whole country. What unites us is our language, our traditions and our customs, not our faith." Then Tanush, once a servant in Gjin's household, spoke up: "If it is by your hand and not that of strangers, and if it will rise from our own stones — then yes! If you lead us, we will follow!" The next day, work began. Stones and clay, walls rising again, hands carving with care, work flowing through deep understanding though no words spoken. On that

hillside, the small community of Delvina built its mosque with the revering silence for the past and the patience demanded by the present.

Today, when one passes through Delvina and looks up toward the old mosque on the hill, with its stones unmoved by centuries gone by, one feels a quiet peace that is not born out of grandeur, but rather humbleness. That mosque does not speak loudly, yet it speaks truthfully: telling the story of a troubled time when a man chose not to vanish away, but instead adapt without forsaking who he was.

Historical period: 16th—17th centuries.

Historical overview

The 16th and 17th centuries brought decisive religious and cultural transformations across Albania. As Ottoman rule consolidated, many regions experienced a gradual transition from Christianity to Islam. This process was neither uniform nor linear, but unfolded over generations as an interplay of political, economic, social and spiritual factors. While the construction of new mosques signaled the spread of Islam, many older churches were adapted for rites of the new creed, reflecting not only the religious but also a continuity of collective memory. Within this context, the Mosque of Gjin Aleksi in Delvina stands as an emblematic case where faith intertwines with historical remembrance.

According to ethnographic records collected in the 1950s—1960s, Gjin Aleksi is remembered as an active historical figure as the Ottoman empire verged upon and advanced towards southern Albania — a Christian local leader of Delvina who fought both Ottoman and Venetian forces. Oral tradition recounts that he built two churches, those of Rusan and Papuçia, which after the Ottoman conquest were later transformed into mosques.

Conditions that gave rise to the monument

The Mosque of Gjin Aleksi was constructed upon the foundations of an earlier church. Visitors describe it as one of the most distinctive religious monuments for its architectural fusion, its structure preserving traces of its previous Christian vestiges – a feature common to many Balkan religious edifices transformed during the centuries long period of Islamization. Situated on an elevated site in Delvina, the mosque was built with finely carved stones. Its windows and columns reflecting the Byzantine church influence, while

the dome and minaret being later Ottoman additions. This material evidence confirms that the building was not raised entirely anew, but adapted with modest changes to accommodate Islamic worship.

Message

The Mosque of Gjin Aleksi is far more than a religious monument. It is a meeting point between historical memory and cultural adaptation, embodying the efforts of communities striving to preserve their past while embracing new realities. The retention of a Christian leader's name on an Islamic sanctuary reveals a deep sense of historical continuity and mutual respect — a local testament to coexistence rather than obliteration.

The Christian founder's name featured in the building in follow-up to its transformation into a mosque represents a layered cultural heritage, where collective memory survived religious conversion and evolved into a symbol of tolerance, continuity and shared identity.

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The Legend of the Gorge of Lament

According to an oral tradition passed down through generations in the Highlands of Kruja, the event took place in the grim days following the fall of Kruja on 16 June 1478 — a decisive moment for the fate of Albanian lands. When the fortress walls finally collapsed and its gates opened to the Ottoman army, a dark wave of uncertainty and violence swept through the city and its surrounding villages. Those who had defended their homeland for years knew that everything had changed. For young women, this meant facing a fate worse than death: captivity, humiliation, violence and perhaps a life of servitude in the harems of the conquerors.

In that terrifying darkness, bereft of hope, ninety young women of Kruja, most of them from families whose sons counted among the ranks of those defending the fortress, made an extraordinary decision. Under the cover of night, they climbed towards a steep, towering cliff on the northern side of the mountain. They wore simple garments, their heads covered with scarves. They reached the cliff no as victims, but as women resolved to not yield control over their fate — neither giving their bodies to the invader nor bringing dishonor to their families nor shame to the memory of the fallen.

In a silent and solemn gesture, as if performing a ritual long prepared, they threw themselves together into the abyss. Their bodies vanished into the dark chasm, leaving behind only a heavy, sacred silence.

People did not mourn them with cries, but with enduring reverence. The place they named the the Gorge of Lament (*Gryka e Vajës*), also known as *the Maidens' Cliff*. It is said that in that thereabouts even the wind blows more softly and that nature's resounding carries a solemn tone. On quiet days, locals say that the echo rising from below resembles the voices of a silent choir of maidens.

This extraordinary act remained in collective memory not as a mere tragedy, but as a conscious and collective sacrifice — a rare gesture that transcends time, elevating the Albanian woman to the stature of a silent heroine who fights not with weapons, but with dignity.

Historical period: 15th century.

Historical overview

The 15th century marks the final efforts of Albanians to preserve independence in the face of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into the Balkans. After the death of Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu in 1468, the front of resistance weakened and important fortified cities unyielding for decades, such as Kruja, began falling one after the other. On 16 June 1478, after a long and arduous siege, Kruja surrendered. Its fall not only marked the loss of a key bastion of Albanian resistance, but also the beginning of a new chapter of political, economic and cultural subjugation. In this atmosphere of fear and humiliation, many women faced impossible choices: submission or self-sacrifice. It is within this historical context that one of the most powerful legends of collective female sacrifice in Albanian memory was born.

Conditions that gave rise to the event

The Ottoman conquest of Kruja was accompanied by widespread violence against the civilian population, including looting, massacres, burning, and especially the enslavement of women and girls regarded as spoils of war. In a social order where honor and family dignity were closely linked to a woman's purity, the threat of captivity or violation was seen as an unerasable shame — not only personal but familial. The culture of the time reinforced the woman's figure as guardian of morality and lineage, and any assault upon her was perceived as the symbolic end of an honorable life. Facing this reality, in order to avoid enslavement, violence or sale in the slave markets, a group of ninety young women from the Highlands of Kruja, most from families that had fiercely fought for the city's defense, chose self-sacrifice.

Their tragic act was not a mere refusal to fall into physical captivity, but a silent protest against the extinction of national and spiritual freedom, against the subjugation of the body and the violation of womanhood as the bearer of honor, memory and identity. It was a rare form of weaponless resistance, a stand taken through self-offering, preserving the one right the invader could never take — the right to say no to life in bondage.

Message

This story stands as one of the most poignant testimonies of collective female sacrifice in Albanian history. It conveys a powerful message about the preservation of dignity and moral integrity in the face of violence — and it exalts the figure of the Albanian woman as ultimate guardians of freedom and the last frontier of honor when all else is lost. Their act of self-sacrifice was not an act of despair, but one of active resistance to injustice and domination, remembered across generations as a heroic deed.

Today, Gryka e Vajës holds profound potential for historical and cultural tourism, serving as a place of remembrance and reflection, a meeting point for history, emotion and civic awareness.

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Sacredness of the Roe Deer – The Story of the Broken Feast

In a remote mountain village, where the shadows of old trees covered the paths and the murmur of flowing streams mingled with the song of nightingales, there lived a people who listened to nature as they would heed a parent or a saint. They walked through the forest with great care, touched no branch for no reason and never raised their voices in the grove for, as the elders said, "that is where the god of the animals rests." In that place, everything was believed to have a soul: the earth, the grass, the water — even the stones. But above all else one creature was never to be harmed — the roe deer. They called it *"the blessed one of the forest"* and *"the spirit that sees but does not speak."*

The oldest among them, old Dodë, remembered a distant summer when his grandfather had told him of a roe deer that once appeared near the mountain hut. It had come down alone, having left its herd, fearless —quenching the thirst in the rushing spring, to then return to the woods without turning the head back to looking. "Do not touch it," the grandfather had said. "It is sacred. It comes in times of peace or when men have forgotten to fear their own selves." But time passes — and with it comes forgetting. Rituals become habit, habits grow old, and memories fall away like autumn leaves. One summer, when water was scarce and the livestock weakened, the young men of the village decided to venture higher into the mountains to hunt. Among them was Leka, a quiet and thoughtful youth who had often heard people call the roe deer "a sacred creature," though sometimes also "a rare meat for the table." It had been years since anyone had seen a roe deer in those parts and the forest seemed to call them. After a long day of tracking in the depths of the densest woods — where sunlight barely broke through the leaves — a roe deer appeared. Graceful, slender-necked and gleaming-skinned, it looked straight at the hunters and did not move. It showed no fear. Its stillness was unsettling. "It's not prey — it's an omen," murmured someone. But a shot rang out. A single crack — and the roe deer fell. Silence followed. Leka, who had pulled the trigger, was the first to approach. The deer was not yet dead. Its breath trembled, its eyes teared. They were eyes other than those of an animal. The were eyes that questioned and seemed to probe into the soul. "He's crying," whispered Leka and his blood froze. He knelt beside the creature and said nothing. Not a word even when his fellows called him to lift the body. Not even when they urged him to celebrate. That evening, by the fire, as the meat roasted and cups clinked, Leka sat apart and spoke only one sentence: "Can't you feel it? Something that was with us — is now gone."

These words demanded no further elaboration. From that night onwards, no one in the village ever went hunting for roe deer again. Nor did anyone raise a gun against the wild goats which at times came nearby at the break of dawn. When they passed through the shaded grove, they walked with bowed heads and whispered, "There, in its shadow, the roe deer awaits not to be forgotten." The mountain understood. A year later, when the grass grew tall and green, old Dodë saw another roe deer pause at the very same brook. A different deer, surely — yet it carried the same serenity. A being that asked for nothing, merely that it not be harmed. Since that day, no one in that village has ever raised the hand against a roe deer. When outsiders come to hunt, the locals tell them the story of *The Broken Feast* and say: "The roe deer is not meat. It is sacred. If you kill it, you have stepped upon your very self."

Historical period: From antiquity to the 20th century.

Historical overview

In traditional Albanian culture, especially in mountainous and rural areas where life was deeply intertwined with nature, there existed a profound spiritual sensitivity toward animals and landscapes. From pre-Christian times to the late 20th century, Albanians nurtured myths and customs that embodied an early form of cultural ecology, a reverence for nature's living beings and sacred places. Certain animals — notably the roe deer, the doe and the wild goat — as well as large trees shading the herding pastures, were regarded as untouchable, sacred and linked to divine presence or the very community's destiny.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

Traditional Albanian society, living in close contact with a harsh yet abundant natural environment, developed a symbolic and normative system that served to preserve ecological balance. Beyond their mythical and religious dimensions, such prohibitions and beliefs functioned as unwritten environmental codes, protecting vital resources such as water, forests, livestock and wildlife. The killing certain animals — particularly the roe deer — was forbidden because of its grace and innocence, while wild goats and does were protected as symbols of fertility and prosperity. Similarly, in the shaded resting places (*mrize*) where herds paused during summer, noise was forbidden, no tree could be cut and no animal could be slaughtered. These were not only sacred areas but also ecologically essential sanctuaries for the survival of herds and livestock. The story *"Gjahu i Malësorëve"* (*The Highlanders' Hunt*) by Kostandin Kristoforidhi illustrates this relationship vividly. The story recounts that, after a long hunting pursuit, a group of highlanders kills

a roe deer. Their joy quickly fades when one hunter approaches and sees the animal "cry like a human being." Shocked and overwhelmed by regret for the act, he exclaims: "Better I had never killed it." This exclamation becomes a moral turning point and resounds as a philosophical appeal counterpoising the world of instinct and that of conscience. The roe deer ceases to be a prey and becomes a sentient and sanctified being, its pain a revelation of the sacredness of life. Through this tale, Kristoforidhi has rendered a powerful mythical motif of all times: if not treated with due respect, nature becomes a source of physical and spiritual sufferings for mankind.

Besides the roe dear, northern Albanian traditions imposed similar taboos, such as prohibition of killing wild goats or does, especially when approaching village premises or else if they be pregnant. People believed in the protective and healing powers of these creatures. Likewise, ethnographer Mark Tirta records that in the Mirdita area there prevailed the belief that large trees growing in groves bore a mystical status and thus could not be cut as woodfire and could in no way be harmed — whilst at times symbolic offerings were made to them in sign of reverence.

While not directly referencing the roe deer, such customary norms carry similar idea regarding the confines of allowed behaviors vis-à-vis nature. At its core, the sacrality of trees or animals represented an ecological code passed down orally across generations.

Message

The myth of the sacred roe deer and related folk tales remind us that human beings are not masters of nature, but part of it. The killing of the deer does not bring triumph — it brings remorse. It is a moral lesson about sensitivity, restraint and respect toward the living world. This cultural legacy conveys timeless values for the protection of animal or trees and the preservation of the balance within oneself — and relays the profound message that the dignity of humankind depends on its reverence for life and nature.

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Mother Albania – The Symbol of National Conscience

In the early 1970s, three Albanian sculptors worked with uncommon devotion in a quiet studio in Tirana. They had been entrusted with an extraordinary task: to create a monument for the National Martyrs' Cemetery — one that would not merely commemorate the fallen but would also embody the very conscience of the nation.

They did not seek to raise an ordinary statue. They sought a spiritual center of gravity — a body that would bear the memory of the past and inspire an entire people, a figure that would represent not only the past but also articulate a moral call to the future.

In the midst of their work, among modelling clay and immersed in concentration, they spoke softly to one another:

> "She must stand as Albania has stood," said one.
> "She must not speak — but her gaze must burn," added another.
> "And she must be a mother," concluded the third, "a mother who does not mourn her sons, but grants them eternity."

Day after day, they modeled with persistence: an upright body, a raised and composed head, a face without defined individuality — yet with features that could belong to every Albanian woman throughout history.

But night brought another dimension. In the stillness of late hours, the clay seemed to breathe. A voice — born of stone and soil — whispered to the artists shaping it:

> "I am Mother Albania.
> You give me form, but I was born centuries ago.
> I watch over the sons who have fallen for the Homeland and keep them always by my side.
> I am a wounded memory,
> but also an inspiration waiting to speak to the generations to come.
> Do not make me beautiful.
> Make me worthy of the pain and pride I represent.
> Let my stance be a silent command,
> and my image — more conscience than ornament."

When the monument was completed and placed on the hill of the Martyrs' Cemetery in 1971, many who saw it for the first time could find no words to utter. It sought neither applauses nor anthem singing. Standing 12 meters tall in bronze, it was not the likeness of a living woman but the embodiment of all Albanian women — those who had borne and buried sons in war, learned the Albanian language in secrecy, and kept alive the flame of identity through centuries.

"Mother Albania" stands upright, built on a strong vertical axis, austere and unadorned — conceived as a pillar of strength conveying authority and endurance. Her raised hand does not bless, nor does it embrace — it summons. It calls for devotion, responsibility and love for the homeland not as a gift, but an ancient trust.

Her gaze features no sorrow, no nostalgia. Her gaze seems emits a loud call, while she teaches in silence of words. She speaks to every generation that passes in front of her. She is a monument of conscience and remembrance, inviting reflection to understand not only who we once were, but who we must strive to be.

From that day onward, the monument became more than a site of homage to the fallen ones — it became a national space of reflection, where memory and challenge, reverence and responsibility meet. Mother Albania stands there still, day and night, watching over her martyrs and inspiring those who climb up the hill to see her up close. She does not speak aloud, yet anyone who pauses in front of her can hear the silent eternal question: "Do you love this land enough? Do you deserve this mother?"

Historical period:

Artistically: 20th century. As a national sentiment: centuries-old.

Historical overview

The concept of Mother Albania is not a literary or political invention. It is the embodiment of a deep collective sentiment that existed long before the ideological expressions of the National Renaissance (Rilindja Kombëtare). Even when lacking a state, Albanians perceived themselves as a community united by blood, language and custom — often imagined as a symbolic mother who protects, calls, nurtures and admonishes her children. Since antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Albanian language, customary law, ancestral traditions and epic songs of bravery preserved a consciousness that, though not yet national in the modern sense, anticipated it.

During the National Renaissance of the 19th century, this deep-seated feeling gained a proper name and articulate voice. In Naim Frashëri's poetry and Abdyl Frashëri's oaths, the notion became clear: Albanians were the children of a single mother — Mother Albania. She was not an abstract figure but a living synthesis of language, history and collective memory, nurturing the spirit of "Albanianhood."

Thus, the Albanian national identity of the 19th century was not a borrowed construct or a romantic invention. It was the crystallization of an enduring sense of belonging, preserved in oral tradition, customary law, heroic ballads and shared rituals. The figure of Mother Albania was born in this context — as a spiritual surname of the homeland, symbolizing unity through kinship.

Conditions that gave rise to the symbol

The long centuries of foreign domination never subdued or assimilated the Albanian people. On the contrary, they deepened the sense of ethnic and cultural survival, transmitted from generation to generation by way of spiritual heritage. This feeling of belonging — though not yet formally national — lived on as ethnic and moral conscience, manifested in shared rituals, customary codes, the preservation of language and the remembrance of ancestors. It intensified during the 18th—19th centuries, when the Albanian language, historical mythology and the cult of Skanderbeg took a renewed form, standing for liberty and honor.

Through these processes of reinforcement of collective memory and spiritual unification, the figure of Mother Albania emerged spiritually and emotionally — shaped by the voices of women in laments that mourned not only the dead but also the wounded homeland, in wedding blessings recalling nostalgia for the birthplace, and in family epics where the homeland appeared as a mother who waits, prays or curses. She was wounded and humbled, yet always alive — a symbol of endurance and hope.

Unlike the analogous national figures of other nations, which often arose as allegories of statehood or republican ideals, Mother Albania was not a forging of of political doctrine. She rose from the people — as a popular spirit, a feeling carried through songs, prayers and acts of quiet resistance.

Her uniqueness lies in her ethical and spiritual roots — in her link to blood, language and soil, rather than transient political ideologies. She is less an allegory of the state than a moral conscience of the nation, one that preceded and outlived every regime.

Message

Mother Albania is not just an artistic figure or a monument of a bygone era. She is the embodiment of collective Albanian conscience, the inner voice that preserved national identity throughout the centuries, not with scepter or crown, but through the living memory and an unextinguished tongue. She is not only the mother of the fallen but also the guardian of the homeland in all its forms: land, language, honor and belonging. She stands not to mourn, but to command in silence — not to glorify a glorious past, but to demand continuity.

Mother Albania stands as a reminder to every generation — that being Albanian is not a matter of name or lineage, but rather of devotion to the land raising you, the language you speak and the dignity that sustains you. She stands tall representing those who do not surrender even when others depart or when times change — for she stands for roots, the heart and shared memory.

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Mother Teresa – The Saint of Mercy

In a world where words often lose their meaning, Mother Teresa spoke through deeds. With her small hands, she washed the wounds of lepers, cradled abandoned children and wiped the brows of the dying. She feared neither filth nor the stench of death, nor the empty gaze of suffering. She went where no one dared to go — into the poorest quarters of Calcutta, among shacks, dusty streets and forgotten souls.

Small in body but immense in spirit, she built a temple of mercy without walls, sustained by the hearts of people. She lived her life in silence — not seeking glory, not making a fuss or gearing up cameras. And when she left this world on September 5, 1997, it was as though a light had gone out. Yet in truth, that light began to shine brighter than ever.

After her death, the Catholic Church initiated the process of her canonization. Though she had never sought after sainthood. For her, every human being possessed dignity and every act of love was worth more than any title. She used to say, "*We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful.*" And she remained faithful — until the end.

Even so, the miracles that occurred after her passing could not be ignored.

The first happened in India, where she had spent most of her life. A poor woman named Monica Besra suffered from a severe abdominal tumor. She had no money for medicine, no support — only her faith. She prayed to Mother Teresa with a broken heart and, within days, without any medical intervention, the tumor disappeared. Doctors had no explanation, but her family knew all to well who had intervened. To them, she was not a nun but rather a living light.

The second miracle occurred in Brazil. A young man, gravely ill and fallen in a coma, had been declared from doctor's a patient beyond hope. Doctors told his family to prepare for the end. Yet they refused to give up. They placed a photograph of Mother Teresa beneath his pillow and prayed with all their hearts. Days passed without change until, suddenly, the inexplicable happened: the young man opened his eyes. He was alive. Through him, Mother Theresa profoundly touched the world once more.

On September 4, 2016, under the open sky of the Vatican, Pope Francis proclaimed her a saint, calling her "*The Saint of Mercy.*" People from around the world — of every faith, complexion and nation — gathered to honor her life. For by then, she no longer belonged only to Catholics, nor only to Albanians or Indians, she

belonged to humanity itself. She was the voice of the voiceless, the hope rekindled for those on the verge of losing it.

That day, Albanianhood — as a shared feeling, a memory of blood, and a spiritual heritage — embraced its daughter with quiet pride. Her name was acclaimed in Shkup (Skopje), Tirana, Prishtina, Ulqin, Tetovo, Presheva and among the Arbëresh communities of Italy. In humble Albanian homes, candles were lit. In churches and mosques alike, prayers were raised. And in people's hearts glowed the conviction that one of their own, a daughter of this land, had risen to heaven as a humane pure light.

She was a figure that had always been loved, always accepted — but that day she became an eternal part of the Albanian spirit. Not because she was famous, but because she was truthful. She never sought power, never desired fame, but humbly gave love to those who had nothing. She was perhaps the only Albanian who succeeded in uniting everyone — Christians, Muslims and atheists alike — around the simplest and strongest value of all: love.

As she herself had put it, better than anyone else before: "If you cannot do great things, do small things with great love." And it was precisely this love that immortalized her.

Historical period:

1910–1997, with influence extending beyond her physical life into the present day.

Historical overview

The early 20th century was an age of great upheavals, with empires collapsing and nations being born. The Balkans were aflame with wars. Albania had only just declared independence, while in Albanian-inhabited lands beyond its borders, such as Shkup (Skopje), Albanians faced repression, poverty and marginalization. It was a time when Albanian identity survived more through word, custom and self-sacrifice than through statehood. In this milieu, a small girl named Gonxhe was born into a devoted Albanian Catholic family, a girl who would one day be known to the world as Mother Teresa.

Conditions that shaped her mission

In a world divided between East and West, between extreme wealth and abject poverty, there emerged a soul that chose not to preach love but to live it. Early 20th-century Shkup was a city of many cultures, marked by political tensions and religious divisions, yet also by a quiet coexistence where Albanians, both Christian and Muslim, shared a common human spirit. The religious upbringing she received at home and within the Jesuit community led Gonxhe toward a vocation that would take her far away from her birthplace, yet never far from her origins.

Message

In a world overflowing with empty words and hollow self-promotion, Mother Teresa's figure stands as a challenge. She reminds us that love has no nationality, though it does have roots. In a time when identity is often ranked by flags and boasted through declarations, she bound Albanianhood to humility, service and sacrifice. The Albanian saint still whispers to us today: "If you have nothing to give, give a smile. And above all — be human."

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The Codices of Berat

In the city of a thousand windows, within the Castle of Berat, people have long spoken in hushed tones of two sacred and rare books — written in golden letters upon purple parchment, preserved as a holy trust. It was said that these manuscripts were not merely words, but *light* passing through the silence of centuries. In 1865, the French traveler Pierre Batiffol arrived in Berat and discovered these manuscripts, describing them with profound admiration. Yet their story had begun long before.

In 1356, when Serbian troops burned down Berat, the priest Skuripeqi and the monk Theodhulos filled several sacks with manuscripts and hid them within the recesses of the church galleries to save them from the flames. Thus way, these manuscripts, known as the Codices of Berat, were to survive the First World War and elude Austrian forces trying to get a hold of them. Then they endured the Italian occupation of 1939 and would again elude the following German occupation and soldiers seeking these relics.

One of the silent guardians of this heritage was Father Papapavli, who revealed to his son, Nasi, the secret place where the codices were hidden — beneath a wooden trapdoor in the Church of the Holy Trinity. After his father's death, Nasi Papapavli returned from emigration and, in 1956, knocked on the doors of the Institute of Sciences in Tirana. He met Professor Aleks Buda, to whom he recounted the story. Professor Buda took the matter seriously, following through with the local authorities in Berat and even visiting the city himself several times in search of the hidden treasure.

But the Codices would not be immediately found. For fifteen years, Nasi Papapavli came to the Institute every two weeks, always asking the same question: *"Have you learned anything about the Codices?"*

Finally, in 1968, they were discovered in one of the churches within the fortress — wrapped in cloth, damaged by humidity, yet spiritually untouched. They were sent to China for restoration and, upon their return, were deposited in the Central State Archive, where they are still preserved to-the-day.

On January 28, 1972, the newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* published an article by Prof. Aleks Buda, announcing the discovery and emphasizing the Codices' historical and cultural significance. He mentioned with deep respect the "elder patriot" Nasi Papapavli, who had kept the vow alive for more than a decade. When Papapavli's son later thanked Buda, the professor replied with a simple yet weighty sentence: *"I am freed from a heavy moral debt toward your father. He never gave up for fifteen years. He came without fail..."*

Historical period: 6th—14th centuries CE

Historical overview

During the early and late Middle Ages (6th—14th centuries), Berat was one of the most important ecclesiastical and cultural centers in southern Albania. Under Byzantine influence, the city experienced a flourishing of religious and intellectual life. Its monasteries and churches became scriptoria (centers of writing and illumination) where sacred texts were translated, copied and richly decorated. These manuscripts carried theological, liturgical and linguistic knowledge — while being venerated by locals as holy relics, often serving as vehicles for the spread of Christian teachings across the region. Despite successive invasions and political upheavals, Berat retained its identity as a spiritual stronghold of Orthodox Christianity within Albanian territories.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

The Codices of Berat were handwritten on parchment and paper by learned monks and clerics working with exceptional devotional discipline. The commitment of the Orthodox clergy, the geographical isolation of Berat's citadel, and the deep reverence for the written word played a crucial role in their preservation. During times of invasion and persecution, the codices were carefully hidden, guarded by both the clergy and the faithful as a shared sacred trust — passed from generation to generation, oftentimes in utter secrecy and silence ensuring their survival through centuries of turmoil.

Of all the surviving manuscripts of Berat, the following two are the oldest and most precious:

- The Purple Codex of Berat (*Codex Purpureus Beratinus*) dating to the 6th century — containing fragments from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, written on purple parchment in golden and silver letters.
- The Golden Codex of Anthimos (*Codex Aureus Anthimi*) dating to the 9th century — including the four Gospels in their entirety, written with extraordinary care and ornate illumination.

These codices represent a most precious and unique European heritage in terms of technique, content and preservation. They bear witness to Albania's early connection with Eastern Christian culture and grant Berat the distinction of being a museum city of spiritual heritage in the Balkans.

Message

In today's world dominated by consumerism and social media, whereby words lose meaning and history fades into neglect, the Codices of Berat remind us of the essential duty to protect cultural memory. They call us to preserve identity through knowledge, language and nurturing of enduring values that transcend time. More than museum artifacts, they are mirrors of continuity — reflecting who we Albanians have been in the past and at present risk to forget. In an age of global uniformity and cultural erosion, their deepest message lies in the awareness that every generation bears a responsibility not only to know, but also to safeguard the spiritual memory of its people.

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The Wedding Procession – The Sacred Journey of Albanian Marriage

On a quiet summer morning, the village roads stirred with unusual liveliness. The elder men of the clan, dressed in traditional attire, gathered one after another, forming what looked like a solemn procession. At the head of the group stood the "kryekrushk" (the chief escort), usually an older, experienced man who knew the customs and proper honoring of both families. He took the lead for the procession, as also the enunciating of words, greetings and gestures that marked that special day. Among the greenery and weathered stones which had witnessed generations pass by, the path of the wedding escorts began, not as a simple journey to bring a bride to her new home, but as a sacred passage, a ritual flowing from within the heart of Albanian tradition. The *krushqit* (wedding escorts) did not travel in silence. They sang. Their song rose into the air, interwoven with the sounds of the *çifteli* and the echo of flutes. In their hands they carried decorated rifles, not out of fear, but by custom, for no escort was to travel unarmed. Elders told how, in earlier times, an enemy might try to block the procession and dishonor the family of the groom. Thus, the *krushqit* were not only singers, they were guardians of family honor. The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, the traditional Albanian customary code, detailed the obligations and courtesies owed to the wedding procession. The *krushqit* made several stops along the way, not for rest, but for spiritual pauses. At one large stone, the *kryekrushk* poured a drop of wine and placed a coin upon the earth. All fell silent as he murmured: "For the good fortune of the couple. For a smooth journey. For a long life." Some lifted their eyes toward the sky, while others raised a toast. Everyone knew this was more than a wedding — it was an alliance, a joining of two families, two houses, two stories into one. And none of it could happen without that sacred road leading from the bride's door to the groom's threshold. t the bride's house, everything breathed reverence. Her mother had not slept all night. She had embroidered by hand the final veil, the token at the same time of pain and blessing. The bride stood there in silence, eyes lowered but face glowing with emotion. The neighborhood girls sang softly in chorus a song that was both prayer and farewell: "Do not weep, bride, do not shed tears, for with flowers you enter the world..." When the procession arrived, the bride's father stood quiet, dignified. All awaited the first words of the *kryekrushk*. He knocked at the door, then spoke firmly: "We have come to take your daughter — not to take her away, but to make her one of ours. With honor and with faith, as our custom commands." The door opened. The bride, veiled in white, stepped forth amid flowers, tears, and blessings. Her mother placed salted bread in her hand and touched

her forehead with a drop of water so she would never forget where she came from. The traditional song *"Krushqit po shkojnë me lule"* (*The wedding escorts go forth with flowers*) accompanied the procession. Its verses blended joy with melancholy, praising the bride's beauty and the family's pride, while also singing out the bittersweet pain of parting. It was an emotional bridge between two homes, a reminder that marriage was both a loss and a union.

The journey of return was quieter. The escorts no longer sang with the same rhythm. Now the sense of responsibility was deeper: they were bringing home a new life, a new honor. At a spring midway, they stopped again. They sprinkled a few drops of water upon the bride's eyes. An elder murmured: "So her eyes may always see goodness — and her heart may always feel kindness." When they reached the groom's house, gunshots were fired into the air and the great celebration began. Yet no one forgot that the journey they had made was more than a road — it was a spiritual passage, a ritual of deep symbolism, discipline and emotion.

Historical period:

From the Middle Ages to the 20th century

Historical overview

Marriage in traditional Albanian society represented far more than the union of two individuals. It was an act that defined relations between families, clans and communities. Marriage was tightly bound to the concepts of honor, alliance and social standing.

The ceremony of taking the bride — the "udha e krushqve" (*path of the wedding escorts*) — embodied symbolically the woman's transition from her parental home to her husband's household. Every stage of the journey carried ritual meaning, codified over centuries and charged with spiritual and communal value.

Conditions that gave rise to the tradition

In rural and highland Albania, marriages were usually arranged between families, mediated by the *krushq*, respected men who acted as negotiators and representatives of the groom's family. The journey to fetch the bride thus became a solemn and sacred procession, accompanied by symbolic acts of singing, dance,

toasts, rifle salutes and ritual stops at chosen landmarks. These practices combined elements of ancient pagan beliefs, Christian blessing rites, and local customary law, fusing them into a living heritage that defined the moral and cultural landscape of Albanian life.

Message

The "*Udha e krushqve*" was never just a road itinerary — it was a rite of passage, a living reflection of the Albanian values of honor, unity, dignity and collective memory. Along this sacred road, men and women, the young and the old, carried with them the very essence of a people who celebrated life through ritual. Even today, though the horse caravans have been replaced by car processions and wedding horns, the spirit enlivening that ancient path still endures. When Albanian cities echo with joyful wedding convoys, it is the voice of that road that revisits — reminding us that marriage, at its heart, is not merely a civil act, but a sacred union grounded in values, custom and emotion.

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The Lover's Grave – An Eternal Memory of Forbidden Love

Bedri was a poor young man from Kruja, who through courage had risen the ranks of the Ottoman army. When the army was downsized, he returned to his hometown uncertain about his future. One day, near a forest spring, a beautiful fairy (*zana*) appeared to him, giving this cryptic warning: *"Beware of the beam and the doe. By the spring, you are safer than by the root."* Sometime later, as Bedri rested near that same spring, a group of horsemen escorting a veiled young woman stopped there. A single glance between him and the girl — whose name, he later learned, was Drenusha (meaning "the doe") — was enough to ignite in him an uncontainable and fateful love. The riders continued toward Tirana, and Bedri, following his heart, went after them. In Tirana, he became unintentionally involved in a local conflict and narrowly escaped death thanks to his former military rank. While recovering in a local household, he discovered that the girl he had seen, Drenusha, was being married against her will to the governor of Tirana. When she saw Bedri again, she confessed her love and begged him to rescue her from the forced marriage. Defying all perils, Bedri took a horse and freed the girl from her imprisonment, breaking the wooden window beam (the *"trau"*) foretold by the fairy. They fled together on a white horse into the night. When the governor discovered their escape, he sent his men in pursuit. Instead of riding toward Kruja ("the spring"), Bedri chose the road toward Ndroq ("the root") in oblivion of the fairy's warning. Along the way, he realized the meaning of her prophecy, but alas it was too late. The pursuers caught up with them near Ndroq. Seeing no way to escape and refusing to surrender the woman he loved and handing her to dishonor, Bedri made his tragic choice. He took Drenusha's life and then his own. Their final breath was a prayer — to be buried together.

Historical period:

18th—19th centuries, with older roots in the oral tradition of Central Albania.

Historical overview

In the patriarchal setting of Albanian society, where *besa* (the pledged word), *honor* and *family* were the pillars of life, free love was often a distant dream — and a dangerous one. Marriages were arranged to

secure alliances and safeguard property, relegating personal feelings secondary to family duty. Constant feuds between clans and cities deepened the impossibility of a pure and self-chosen love.

Conditions that gave rise to the legend

These conflicts and obligations made love itself an act of rebellion. Thus, tales of true love survived as legends, transmitted orally from generation to generation, transforming personal tragedy into a symbol of devotion and idealism.

The existence of the *Lover's Grave* (*Varri i Ashikut*) in Ndroq was documented in the 19th century by Johan Georg von Hahn and Spiridon Gopčević. Robert Elsie, in his retelling, presents the story of the two lovers as a classic example of the romantic ideal of the epoch. Another folk version recounts of two lovers named Bukuria and Faqebardhi, separated by social barriers and customary tradition, who were buried together in the place that still bears the name *Varri i Ashikut*.

Message

The *Lover's Grave* stands as a symbolic monument to love that defies all obstacles. It stands as an eternal reminder of the moving power and tragedy tied to pure affection, showing that love can transcend even death.

This site remains a poignant cultural landmark, a symbol that reminds us how true love, though often at odds with social conventions, continues to live on in a people's collective memory. By preserving and valuing this legend, we also safeguard its timeless message — that love, in its purest form, is both sacrifice and immortality.

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"The Voice Suspended in Stone" – The Legend of the Maiden of the Holta Canyon

When you enter the heart of the Holta Canyon, where the river's waters flow quietly through the carved rocks, echoing with a soft murmur, the locals say that it is not only nature that speaks — but also the voice of a girl who has never found rest. They call it *"the maiden's voice"*, and, they say, the legend is as old as the river itself.

Long ago, in a village above the canyon, there lived a girl of rare beauty, with hair dark as the night and eyes that mirrored the mountains' light. She was raised with love, but also confined within the strict rules of customs keeping the ways of old. Her heart belonged to a young shepherd — poor, but noble in spirit — who lived across the river and played his flute (*fyell*) every evening to greet her from afar.

Their love was a secret known to everyone except one: her father. He had arranged her marriage to an old bey from Elbasan, a powerful and wealthy man seeking a young wife to revive his name. When the news of the forced marriage spread, the shepherd left the village under the cover of night, leaving no trace behind. In despair, the maiden asked to visit the river once more so as *"to wash her eyes and speak to nature, which had witnessed her love."*

Dressed in her bridal garments — a white vest embroidered with golden threads and a shawl over her hair — she descended to the edge of the canyon. There, at a high point where the rock hangs suspended above the depths, she raised her arms to the sky and released a cry that, according to legend, has never faded. Then, she leapt. The river embraced her body — and fell silent.

Those who went searching for her found no trace, neither body nor dress, but a white shawl caught in the branches of a willow growing by the water. From that day, the canyon was called "the canyon of mourning" and the high cliff from which she jumped became known as the Maiden's Rock. The old women say that from time to time, when the northern wind blows and the sun begins to sink, one can hear a faint lament carried through the waters, a whisper not of the living.

Today, visitors walking through the Holta Canyon are moved not only by its natural beauty but also by the story that lives on — in the stones, the river, and in the voices of locals who continue to tell it with quiet reverence and remembrance.

Historical period: 18th—19th centuries

Historical overview

The 19th century marked a period of profound upheavals and transformations in Albanian society under the Ottoman Empire. The tension between the patriarchal order and the rising individual desire for personal freedom was reflected in all aspects of life — economic, social and cultural. The region of Gramsh, part of the highlands of Central Albania, preserved strong patriarchal structures in which religion, custom and honor defined the core of social existence. Arranged marriages were the norm and a woman's identity was inseparable from the honor of her family. Within this context, the legend of the Maiden of Holta embodies a rare stance of defiance against imposed tradition, a silent act of rebellion expressed through personal tragedy.

Conditions that gave rise to the legend

In a society where marriages were imposed without a woman's consent and freedom to love was seen as a violation of moral order, tragedies like that of the Maiden of Holta arose as rare but powerful acts of resistance. The Holta Canyon in Gramsh — a natural marvel formed by the erosion brought about by the Holta River descending from the mountains of Poroçan — became both the setting and the symbol of the struggle between pure emotions and social constraints. With its steep cliffs, dense shrubs and tranquil silence that seems to speak the language of nature, the canyon is not just a backdrop landscape, but rather an active participant in the tale: a stage where human feeling collide with the weight of tradition. Confronted with a forced marriage to an old bey — a figure of power, wealth and patriarchal authority — the young woman resolved to surrender not to submission, but transformation. Her leaping turned the canyon into both a tomb and an altar, her voice merging with that of the murmuring river. This painful conflict between love and duty, between the free spirit and a society that equated freedom with sin, was mirrored by nature itself, which wild and untamed reflected her turmoil and sheltered her final act of silent resistance.

Message

Today, the legend of the Maiden of Holta represents not only a cherished piece of intangible spiritual heritage, but also an archetypal figure of freedom and women's rights. Visited by travelers and researchers

alike, the site continues to inspire not only by virtue of its natural beauty but also through the living memories it nurtures. The legend stands as a cultural reminder and a starting point for dialogue on human dignity, gender equality and the power of oral heritage in shaping collective consciousness. It is part of the local identity of Gramsh and a treasure for future generations seeking to understand the emotional depths and enduring spirit of their people.

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Cape of Rodon – A Silent Place Guarding History, Faith and Hope

It is said that on dark nights, when the northern wind blows and the waves crash against the rocks, at the Cape of Rodon one feels as though time has stopped and that, with a little imagination, one can almost see the figures and events of centuries gone by. Ancient legends tell of a mysterious light that once shone upon the cliff — a beacon for sailors lost at sea. This light, once believed to be a blessing from unknown deities, was to be later seen as a sign of divine protection and hope. It is no coincidence that two of Albania's most precious monuments — Skanderbeg's Castle and the Church of St. Anthony (*Shën Ndou*) — were built on this very cape. Around 1451–1452, after a period of alternating war and peace with the Ottoman Empire.

Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu chose this solitary, strategic site near his capital Kruja to erect a fortress. Independent from Venetian control, the castle would serve as a secure exit to the sea in case the army needed to retreat or else for ease of communication with western allies. The historian Marin Barleti records that Skanderbeg had even begun building a small city there, which he called *"Kjurilë"* or *"Chiurilium"*. The Ottomans later found it deserted and unfinished — and razed it to the ground. Barleti also recounts that Skanderbeg once spent part of the summer and autumn at Rodon with his wife, enjoying hunting and leisure at a time when warfare did not demand his immediate presence. The fortress, built upon solid terrain, had thick walls descending from the hill down to the coast, forming an unsurmountable shield against any assault. Venetian travelers and later Albanian scholars described it as a work of great military foresight. Though only fragments now remain in silent defiance of centuries gone by, the outer defensive wall measured 100 meters long, ending at the sea and featuring two round towers. The fortress was destroyed by the Ottomans in 1467 and later repaired by the Venetians in 1500.

A few hundred meters from the castle, nestled between two hills, stands the Church of St. Anthony of Padua (*Shën Ndou*). Built in the Middle Ages, perhaps atop an earlier sacred site, it became a center of pilgrimage and prayer for hundreds of believers. For many Albanian Catholics, St. Anthony's Day is the time they return here seeking healing, blessing and spiritual peace. Near the church there once stood a monastery. Historical records mention both the Monastery of St. Mary and the Monastery of St. Anthony, one of the earliest Franciscan convents known since 1599. The monks who lived there were revered for their wisdom and life in harmony with nature. They aided villagers, prayed for sailors and gave the entire

region a sense of sanctity. Old accounts tell that during stormy nights, the monks would light candles so their glow might guide ships through the darkness — a gesture perhaps continuing a much older tradition, when fire was lit on the same spot to guide sailors across the sea. In this small stretch of land above the waters, war and peace, earthly struggle and spiritual devotion, are deeply intertwined. Here, Skanderbeg built his fortress to protect the land, while the faithful raised a church to safeguard the soul. And between these two monuments, the wind still blows, carrying with it the voices of many ages past.

Historical period: From Antiquity to the 20th century

Historical overview

The Cape of Rodon, also known as the Cape of Skanderbeg's Muzhli, on the Adriatic coast, has for centuries long served as a point where nature, defense and faith converge. With its elongated shape stretching into the sea formed by land eroded by winds and water, this promontory has drawn attention since antiquity: from ancient sailors to medieval warriors and monks. Today, it preserves the remains of a castle built by Skanderbeg, according to Marin Barleti, and the ruins of the Church of St. Anthony, one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites for Albanian Catholics.

Conditions that gave rise to the site's legacy

The Cape's location is a gift from nature allowing anyone seeking to see far into the horizon, to defend from enemies or else to find refuge for the soul. Surrounded by the sea on three sides and separated from the mainland by wooded hills, the cape has long been both protected and secluded — ideal for strategic fortifications. Though erosion has reshaped its vestiges over time, the stories embedded in its soil and stone endure to-the-day.

Message

The Cape of Rodon embodies the continuity of Albanian history encompassing the struggle for survival and defense and the enduring search for peace and faith. It is more than a geographic landmark, for it is a meeting point between land, sea and transcendence. Today, the cape is one of Albania's most visited places, prompting admiration not only for its natural beauty but also for its historical and spiritual resonance. It invites every visitor to pause, gaze beyond the horizon and listen to the quiet testimony of its stones — which still speak of the nation's shared heritage.

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Albanian Silversmiths and Filigree: Craftsmanship, Identity and Heritage

The Silver Pen

Spring of 1881. The city of Shkodra hummed with the sounds of the marketplace teaming of crowds moving like sea currents through its narrow-cobbled streets. The silversmiths' workshops glowed like small hearths of light. The flicker of the furnaces, the gleam of thin silver sheets, the soft hiss of wires twisting over moulds... all gave these workshops an air of quiet magic. A sense of anticipation filled the air. Word had spread across the city: three hundred young women of Shkodra had decided to offer Princess Elena Gjika (Dora d'Istria) a writing pen made entirely of silver filigree. For them, this was more than a gift. Dora d'Istria — writer, publicist, and tireless advocate of the Albanian cause and women's rights — was to receive a token of gratitude, inscribed in the silent language of her homeland. The city's finest masters were summoned. The workshop of Kolë Prenushi, known for its lace-like filigree, became a shared stage of artistry. Day and night, the craftsmen drew silver wire to the fineness of a hair, twisting it into spirals, stars and rosettes. Each motif carried a hidden wish for the princess: courage for free speech, light for free thought, blessing for the nation. When the pen was finished, it seemed born of air and light — a "silver lace" that shimmered like the written word itself. Its light structure was an intricate weaving of lines and voids, where transparency became part of the design — much like free thought, flowing through and beyond boundaries.

The day of the presentation became a civic celebration. Three hundred girls, dressed in traditional costume, carried the pen through the stone streets of Shkodra, singing songs of gratitude. The sunlight fell upon the silver like rippling water, and to all who watched, the object was no longer merely a writing tool — it was a living letter from Shkodra to Europe.

Historical period:

From the Late Middle Ages to the early 20th century – with its height during the 18th–19th centuries, continuing into the 20th century and beyond through family-run artisan workshops.

Origins of the craft

The rise of Albanian silversmithing as a vital branch of urban economy is closely tied to the expansion of trade, the circulation of precious metals and the development of an urban culture that valued finely crafted objects for both everyday use and ceremonial or religious functions.

The formation of guilds (*esnafs*) with defined rules ensured long-standing apprenticeships, professional standards and consistent quality. Motifs and techniques from the broader Balkan and Mediterranean world were absorbed and reinterpreted according to local taste, resulting in a distinct Albanian repertoire of forms and ornaments that gave the craft a unique artistic identity.

Historical overview

Silversmithing was one of the pillars of urban craftsmanship in Albania, reflecting the meeting of aesthetic sensibility and economic life. From the Late Middle Ages to the 20th century, cities such as Shkodra, Prizren, Gjakova, Elbasan and Berat, became centers for producing luxurious gold and silver objects for daily use, social display, and religious ceremony. As urban life expanded, workshops multiplied and specialized. By the late 17th century, many families in Shkodra and Elbasan depended entirely on this trade, while in Prizren some forty-seven workshops were recorded in the city center. The great markets of the 18th–19th centuries, like Shkodra's *bezistan*, reflected this role of cities as hubs of refined craftsmanship and commerce. In these workshops, artisans practiced numerous techniques, encompassing hammering, casting, engraving, chasing, granulation and the intricate art of wirework. The aesthetic apex was filigree — a delicate lace of twisted gold or silver wire, soldered with precision into spirals, rosettes and floral patterns.

From the Latin *filum* ("thread") and *granum* ("grain"), filigree involved drawing silver wire to microscopic thinness, twisting pairs of wires, forming them into geometric or vegetal motifs, and joining them by fine soldering, sometimes adding tiny beads to accentuate intersections. The result was a transparent surface featuring an interplay of light and shadow, where air itself became part of the composition — a style harmoniously echoed in the white garments of northern Albanian costumes and the silk hues of the south. Hence, filigree came to be known as "the silver lace". Albanian silversmiths produced a wide range of objects:

- Personal adornments — bracelets, earrings, rings, necklaces, coin pendants, belt buckles, watch chains, hairpins and hat ornaments.
- Ritual and religious items — crosses, silver-covered icons, oil lamps and candelabra.
- Decorative weaponry — daggers, guns, and horse trappings adorned with silver filigree, enhancing both brilliance and social prestige.

These items are frequently mentioned in descriptions of northern Albanian tradition, especially from Shkodra, Prizren and Gjakova, and today many are preserved in museums across Albania and beyond. Household objects — cups, trays, mirrors, frames and furniture inlays — also bore filigree detailing, embodying refinement and prosperity. Within urban culture, a filigree piece communicated both economic status and aesthetic taste, often preserving traditional motifs handed down through generations of artisans. Though not isolated to Albania, the Balkan filigree tradition is part of a broader Mediterranean and Eastern continuum, documented since antiquity and flourishing during the Ottoman period. Motifs such as rosettes, vines, arabesques and stars are widely shared, but Albanian artisans distinguished themselves through compositional balance and subtlety of line — giving rise to recognizable local schools, like the Prizren tradition, noted for its extremely fine meshwork, which became the city's signature identity.

By the 19th century, filigree had become so dominant that other decorative techniques faded, and it emerged as the defining aesthetic of Albanian metalworking — not just a fashion but a demonstration of technical and artistic perfection, elevating craftsmanship to the level of art. Today, ethnographic museums and silversmith workshops allow us to witness this heritage firsthand. The filigree belts and trays of Berat, as also the collections in Shkodra, Gjirokastra and Prizren, testify to a dialogue between crafts — metal, textile, wood and stone — and to an economy attuned to both tradition and refinement. More than a technique, filigree is a visual language — an emblem of a civic culture that united beauty, skill and dignity. As tangible heritage, it preserves the memory of the workshop, of handcraft, of the "rhythm of the flame", whilst as intangible heritage, it carries the codes of taste, ritual and aesthetic self-awareness. In today's context, with cultural tourism fostering demand for local authenticity, Albanian filigree has the potential to become a national cultural brand —lacing stories of our cities, markets and artisans of sharp eyes, steady hands and inspired hearts.

Message

Albanian filigree remains a living heritage and a cultural signature. Family workshops in Shkodra, Prizren, Gjakova, Elbasan and Berat continue to craft jewelry and objects using age-old techniques, while contemporary artists reinterpret filigree in modern jewelry and design. It serves as a symbol of national identity, featured in diplomatic gifts and cultural souvenirs, and safeguarded through museums and artisan centers, as also initiatives to register it as intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO. Filigree thus bridges the historical memory of Albania's cities with the creative economy of the 21st century, standing as a lasting emblem of artistry, cultural identity and the human hand's enduring mastery.

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Albanian Traditional Costumes – Craftsmanship, Identity, and Living Memory

In a remote village of Malësia e Madhe, spring's arrival was heralded by singing and the scent of freshly washed wool. On the eve of every wedding, courtyards glowed with great bonfires. The night before the ceremony took place was known as "The Night of the Xhubleta." According to local lore, it was more than a night of joy, for it was an ancient ritual, where every gesture carried the weight of meaning.

At dusk, the elder women would bring the looms close to the fire. Strands of wool, dyed with walnut bark and madder root, shimmered under the flickering light. Young women — among them the brides-to-be — twisted black braids (*gajtan*) over white fabric, their hands moving in rhythm with old wedding songs. Each verse was like a prayer: a wish for protection and harmony for the new marriage. They said the songs "bind the dress to the heart."

At midnight, the rhapsodes took their turn. They sang of the Bride of the Mountain, the legendary heroine who, according to belief, brought to these highlands the first model of the Xhubleta — the bell-shaped traditional dress. It was said that she wore it to preserve the mountain's strength and to bless every home that remembered her name. Each time the song echoed, the braids on the garments seemed to move gently, carrying the power of that mythical figure.

When dawn broke, the first light of day found the brides dressed in the Xhubleta they had woven with their own hands. The garment was not mere clothing attire: every line, coin and layered fold held a memory, a prayer, and a sign of identity. As UNESCO emphasized in its 2022 inscription, the Xhubleta carries symbolic codes and is accompanied by songs and stories that sustain the community's identity.

Even today, this ritual endures in many villages of Malësia. Workshops reopen, old songs are revived and the younger generations learn to "read" the signs of the xhubleta as a living language. "As long as the song of the Bride of the Mountain is sung, the Xhubleta will never die," say the elders — turning the Night of the Xhubleta into a timeless celebration where art, love and identity meet.

Historical period:

From the Late Middle Ages to the mid-20th century, flourishing during the 18th—19th centuries in urban centers and in regions with strong textile traditions. The practice continues into the 21st century through museums, artisan workshops and the cultural scene both in Albania and abroad.

Historical overview

Alongside the weaving of wool, silk and cotton textiles, the art of tailoring and decorating traditional clothing with gold and silver threads, braids and ornamental ribbons, held a central place in Albanian craftsmanship. Together with song, dance and music, dressing attire became one of the most visible expressions of folk art, setting the Albanian world apart within the broader Balkan landscape.

From medieval icons and frescoes depicting noble attires down to the Ottoman period when velvet and golden threads spread through the cities, traditional dresses evolved into a mosaic of regional styles, each element carrying profound meanings. European travelers and intellectuals were deeply impressed by these Albanian traditional attires. Lord Byron and his companion John Cam Hobhouse (Lord Broughton) wrote admiringly of Albanian costumes. Byron's portrait dressed in Albanian attire became an icon of 19th-century Europe and of the Romantic movement itself. In the early 20th century, Faik Konica likewise chose this visual language of national representation, posing for portraits in the southern Albanian costume during official events, turning dressing into a silent yet powerful diplomacy.

The craft of dressmaking grew with the cities, the expansion of markets and the circulation of raw materials. Tailors and embroiderers' guilds (*esnafs*) established strict hierarchies — apprentice, journeyman, master — and maintained high standards of skill. In the villages, loom work passed from mother to daughter, preserving home-based textile techniques. Mediterranean influences brought new motifs such as arabesques and rosettes, yet these were reinterpreted through local aesthetics — black braid on white cloth, golden thread on red velvet, bold contrasts still captivating viewers of museum collections to-the-day.

Social events such as engagements, weddings, religious and seasonal festivities elevated costumes status as both symbolic and economic capital. A fine costume was not just "new clothing" for it was the calling card of a household, the proof of work, dignity and prosperity.

The process began with the material itself: wool was spun and woven for men's trousers (*tirq*), the Xhubleta or skirts, while cotton and silk were used for shirts, aprons and embroidered panels. Natural dyes made of

walnut husk, madder and indigo, yilded vibrant and lasting colors. Tailors cut and shaped the garments by regional type, while embroiderers decorated their surfaces with gold and silver threads, silk cords and fine *gajtan* braids forming arabesques, rosettes, braids and parallel bands.

Silver buttons, coin pendants and even filigree details created texture, rhythm and light. Finally, meticulous pressing and finishing gave the garments their sculptural elegance — the result of countless unseen hours of skilled labor.

In the north, black woolen trousers (*tirq*) with dense braiding and the Xhubleta for women form a complete visual language. The Xhubleta, with its bell-shaped form, tiered structure, colorful belts and metallic decorations, is among the oldest garments of the Albanian cultural sphere. In 2022, it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, giving thus international recognition to the fragile knowledge behind its making, as also encouraging highland communities to perservere in keeping it alive.

In central and southern Albania, the *fustanella* became the emblem of male attire, paired with an embroidered waistcoat (*xhamadan*), broad sash and pom-pomed shoes (*opinga*). Urban centers such as Shkodra, Berat, Elbasan, Korça and Gjirokastra, developed distinctive "schools" of tailoring and embroidery.

The numerous Marubi photographs and ethnographic collections provide a vivid visual map of regional styles, from the refined simplicity of the urban vest to the solemnity of the bridal ensemble. The decorative patterns were never solely aesthetic — they conveyed age, marital status, economic position and regional belonging. For a bride, the wedding costume represented the pinnacle of craftsmanship and family pride. Preserved in chests, repaired and re-sewn, it was often passed down generations as a living relic. The embellishment of clothing and weaponry with filigree was also a mark of the era. Tailors frequently collaborated with silversmiths, as belt buckles, watch chains, silver buttons and fine wire applications added a distinctive brilliance to the costume.

Message

Today, the Albanian folk costumes continue to inspire admiration. The Ethnographic Museums of Kruja, Kavaja and Elbasan exhibit original garments, showcase techniques of their making and document regional variations — serving as open classrooms where children and adults alike can "read" the signs of the past. Across Albania, artisans still sew and embroider on commission, while the bazaar of Kruja remains renowned for workshops producing traditional garments, felt caps and slippers following ancestral techniques. With a contemporary approach, many designers, performers and cultural groups integrate traditional motifs into modern fashion and stage art. This creative revisiting of Albanian costume heritage shows that the latter is not confined to closed museum displays, but rather represents a living practice, adapting and evolving with time — a thread that continues to weave identity, artistry and memory together.

Bibliography

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