

## Overlooked heritage of Albania: chronicle of rescue, conservation and community involvement at Great Prespa Lake

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### *Abstract*

*A set of actions, concerning conservation policies, have been undertaken in Great Prespa Lake Region, Albania during the last years. The activities, as presented in this paper, are part of a project driven by European Heritage Volunteers in partnership with the GFA Consulting Group, the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve Prespa Project and with the collaboration of Polytechnic University of Valencia. This joined partnership has made possible the creation of a document “Guidelines for interventions at vernacular architecture at Great Prespa Lake” as following explained. The guidelines are finally aiming to all the villages of the Biosphere Reserve of UNESCO, but the result has been possible thanks specially to the study – in detail – of one of the rural communities located in the region – Zaroshke. The village has been selected and analyzed as a possible pilot project for conservation policies and community involvement, during the summer of 2021, thanks to the participation of local communities and international volunteers (students and young professionals) through the systematic documentation of vernacular architecture of the village.*

**Keywords:** survey; heritage policies; data collection; local engagement; community involvement.

### 1. Introduction

European Heritage Volunteers has been organising for more than twenty years training courses and volunteering projects throughout Europe that provide education and volunteering opportunities in the field of heritage. Most of them take place in rural areas where a significant number of endangered heritage sites can be found, presenting ideal circumstances for intervention by heritage volunteers. The European Heritage Volunteers Programme is very diverse

and includes handicraft-based projects, projects in archaeology, restoration-conservation, and documentation and research as well as projects in historical parks and gardens and in cultural landscapes, and projects aiming towards the revitalisation of abandoned heritage sites (AA.VV., 2019a). The training courses and volunteering projects, each lasting two weeks, are led by experienced craftspeople or other field-specific professionals, and are open to both professionals and volunteers with no previous heritage-linked training or skills.



Fig. 1. Zaroshke surrounded by fields and its relation with Big Prespa Lake (Source: EHV, 2021).

Exchanges between participants coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds make up an essential part of European Heritage Volunteers' concept – students of heritage-linked subjects often obtain their first practical experiences in their study-field during training courses and volunteering projects, whereas they have the opportunity to share their theoretical knowledge with participants who have more hands-on experience. In this frame, sharing the same values as European Heritage Volunteers, Polytechnic University of Valencia was involved in a teaching summer project in order to foster and better understand intangible and tangible values of the Albanian part of the Prespa Lake Biosphere Reserve. This is to contribute to conserve the richness of the cultural frame of the region and to improve policies of conservation, above all concerning traditional and vernacular architecture.

## 2. A Portrait of Great Prespa Lake Region

The area of study consists of nine villages which together create the Municipality of Pustec and lay on the western and southern shores of Great Prespa Lake, South-East Albania (Fig.1-2).

Geomorphologically the area is divided from the mainland by the nearly 1.100 meters high Zvezda Mountain pass which could be passed till recent times only by a simple road what led – in combination with the during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century strictly controlled border to

former Yugoslavia in the north and to Greece in the east – to a quite isolated situation of the area (Fremuth, 2015). This isolation led to a high level of self-sufficiency and the conservation of traditional agricultural structures; the fact that the area is – in difference to the mainland – populated by Macedonians to a strong local identity (AA.VV., 2019b).



Fig. 2. Location plan of Zaroshke (Source: EHV, 2021).

In result, the Great Prespa Lake Area comprises a rich and diverse set of vernacular architecture which can not be found in other regions of Albania. This concerns traditional residential buildings, but in particular smaller vernacular edifices (AA.VV., 2011). This rich material heritage goes hand in hand with a rich immaterial heritage: the traditional techniques and crafts used to create the vernacular architecture.

However, both the material and the immaterial heritage are endangered to disappear due to several reasons: the traditional agricultural structures are eroding – cattle breeding and

subsidiary agriculture will probably die out soon since the people currently practicing them are in their sixties or seventies; the need for economic development and the hope for raising tourism brings pressure which is not adequately balanced by the needed regulations, and the vernacular buildings and edifices are not appreciated by the local population, since they are understood as part of the everyday-life.



Fig. 3-4. Examples of rural buildings and still alive traditions at Zaroshke (Source: Cristini, 2021).

On the other hand, just the vernacular architecture of the area bears a big potential to keep and strengthen the local identity as well as for the touristic development of the region. In fact, if the value of the vernacular architecture would be well understood and conceptualised, the Prespa National Park could be the only national Park in Albania which attracts visitors by a combination of natural heritage and cultural heritage (Fig. 3-4).

Such a concept could be further developed when underlining the linking elements between the protection of the natural environment and ver-

naacular architecture as it is the case by the use of natural materials, traditional handcrafts and sustainable techniques.

### 3. Vernacular identity of the region

The villages of the region have a special link with a rich set of local raw materials. Clay, rocks, timber and fibers are deeply present in all the traditional constructive details of rural architecture, due to the rich geology and special environment offered by the Prespa Lake. Historically, before World War II, the houses of the villages have been built prudently far from the shores of the lake, respecting a special plot system (Klein 2018; Stiller 2019). Builders were used to work with lime carved stone blocks (or adobes, above all used for auxiliary buildings) with modest cubature, not higher than one or two levels of structures.

Timber ties were also used, both vertically and horizontally, to add breaks within walls. This made the wall more flexible to prevent cracks and make the structure earthquake resistant (Kallamata, 2018). Traditional curved tiles were hung on top of the framework of the shed/gamble roofs in parallel rows, with each row overlapping the row below to prevent rain-water from dripping inside (AA.VV., 2007).

Above all in auxiliary buildings and storages (for forage or animals' shelters) wattle and daub structures were guarantying simply volumes with thatched roofs, made up with local canes and fibers. These materials, as simply sticks or waved in more complex structures are also visible in fences and divisions of historic plots and properties. After World War II and the establishment of communist system, constructive activities and actions borrowed from Soviet Union started to change the urban and architectural planning of the villages (Fig. 5).

Above all during 1960s, 1970s, 1980s the social change plus the progressive migration from dwellers of isolated villages to big cities increased a certain policy of abandonment of traditional constructive techniques and local constructive know-how.

The period after the 1990s has also not contributed in conservation policies. The renewal approach of the state has not helped conservation of vernacular architecture (Müller, Munroe 2008). Lacks of rules, lack of protection lists and minimal professional requirements are factors that have brought massive individual constructions. Buildings without any link with local architecture have started to fulfil the region, with new dwellings that have no link with autochthonous constructive features.

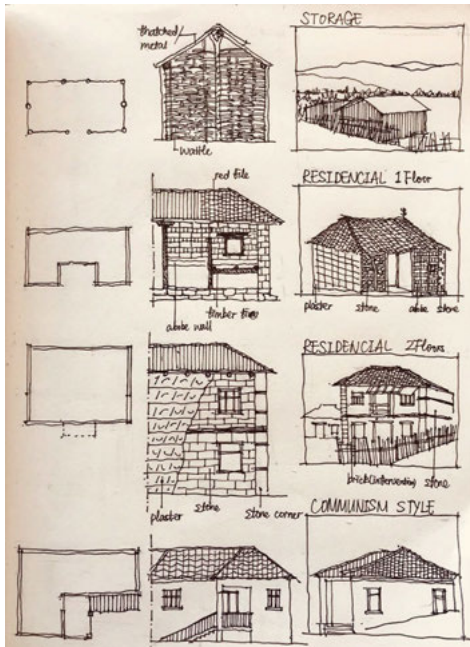


Fig. 5. Classification of local buildings “typologies” (Source: EHV, 2021).



Fig. 6. Data collection in collaboration with local dwellers (Source: Cristini, 2021).

Volumes, cubature, roof structures, openings, colours and textures among others details are absolutely in contrast with inherited constructive techniques by existing architecture.

Only in the last decades a certain interest for domestic architecture has started, also due to creation of Prespa National Park, as well as a general more conservative policies approach for the full region and its intangible value.

#### 4. Methodology and goals of the training course

The training course was a follow-up of several European Heritage Volunteers Projects in Albania. During the years the NGO got familiar with the challenges for the vernacular architecture in the villages surrounding Great Prespa Lake and developed the idea of the European Heritage Training Course for 2021.

Thanks to the support of Polytechnic University of Valencia a methodological approach was possible in order to classify all the rural buildings of Zaroshke. This is one of the nine villages in the Great Prespa Lake area with the smallest municipality in Albania and the only one with Macedonian population – and who have altogether around 3,000 inhabitants.

The village has been chosen due to comparable well-preserved rural edifices in the village on one hand and the expected pressure for economically-caused interventions due to the village’s position directly at the shore of the Great Prespa Lake on the other hand. In this frame ten young heritage professionals plus instructors, with support of institutions active in the region and local inhabitants have started to classify the sectors of the entire village defining the mapping of buildings built before World War II with historic constructive techniques.

All these pre selected buildings (150 case studies out of more than 300 buildings) have later been analysed with a special detailed set of templates.

This classification was possible thanks to interviews of local owners (Fig. 6), with technical visits at the properties and with a selection of pictures to better understand the state of art of the case studies. A common tangential analysis

of constructive techniques (walls, roofs, plasters, fences, openings etc.) was finally undertaken, in order to better understand possible problems linked to further maintenance guidelines (Pompejano, 2020).



Fig. 7. Planning of work with volunteers (Source: Cristini, 2021).

### 5. Outcomes of the training course

The training course and the creation of a rich data base are key factors that further made possible the creation of complete guidelines (Fig. 7). Thanks to this document the village Zaroshke shall be projected as a whole, to maintain its traditional layout, historical style and features, and spatial dimensions.

The guidelines are insisting in that all intervention or development shall conserve or enhance the existing relation between the village, the natural landscape and environment with which it coexists (Scalet et al., 2014).

To promote development that acknowledges the unique traditions, culture, history and character that defines Zaroshke, the urban plan should have following objectives:

- To promote development that reinforces the value, the quality and the diversity of Zaroshke’s vernacular architecture;
- To maintain and promote relatively low-density and small-scale development;
- To promote development that enhances the existing links between Zaroshke and its natural surroundings.

The recommended measures in this frame are stressing the roles of urban planning, regulations for new buildings, general conservation

measures at historic residential buildings, general handling of smaller edifices, general handling of wall and fences and traditional paths (Aliaj, 2007). The final dossier counts also with maps, templates and details (Fig. 8-9), in order to recognise and a quick classification of interesting buildings at different scales.

		GPS LOC. 40.765195, 20.509543		FLOORS	B	18
BUILDING CONSTRUCTION TYPE	RESIDENCIAL	ALIBRARY	POSITION	E	I	
	STORAGE	OTHER	USE	Y	N	F
STATE OF CONSERVATION	N	M	U	R	PERIODS	1 2 3
VULNERABILITY	LOW	MEDIAL	HIGH	VERY HIGH		
PLOT	PASTURE	GRASS	GARDEN	ORCHARD	UNKNOWN	
FENCE	TIMBER	ADOBE	STONE	CONCRETE BLOCK	METAL	BARBED WIRE UNKNOWN
ENTRANCE	TIMBER	METAL	PVC	WITHOUT	UNKNOWN	
ROOF STRUCTURE	SHED	STRUTURE	GAMBILE	HIP	SLAB	UNKNOWN
ROOF COVERING	CURVED TILE	FLAT TILE	THATCHED	METAL	CONCRETE	PLASTER UNKNOWN
EAVE	TIMBER	FIBER	STONE	BRICK	METAL	CONCRETE PLASTER UNKNOWN
WALL STRUCTURE	ADOBE	TIMBER	PURPLE BRICK	TIMBER TIE	METAL	
	STONE	WATTLE&DAUB	ORANGE BRICK	CONCRETE	UNKNOWN	
JOINTS	EARTH	LIME	MIXED	CEMENT	UNKNOWN	DETAILS FLUSH EXTRUDED
PLASTER	EARTH	LIME	MIXED	CEMENT	UNKNOWN	DETAILS DRAWN UP INSCRIPTION
SOLE	STONE	TIMBER	WATTLE & DAUB	P BRICK	O BRICK	CONCRETE UNKNOWN
OPENINGS	EARTH	TIMBER	STONE	P BRICK	O BRICK	CONCRETE WITHOUT UNKNOWN
LINTELS	TIMBER	STONE	CONCRETE	P BRICK	O BRICK	PLASTER UNKNOWN
WINDOWS	TIMBER	PVC	METAL	UNKNOWN	DETAILS WITH GLASS NO GLASS	WALLED
SHUTTERS	TIMBER	PVC	METAL	WITHOUT	UNKNOWN	
DOORS	TIMBER	PVC	METAL	WITHOUT	UNKNOWN	
OTHER ELEMENTS	PORCH	BALCONY	VENTILATION HOLES	CHIMNEY	Ovens	TOILETS

Fig. 8. Example of classification template (Source: EHV & Cristini, 2021)

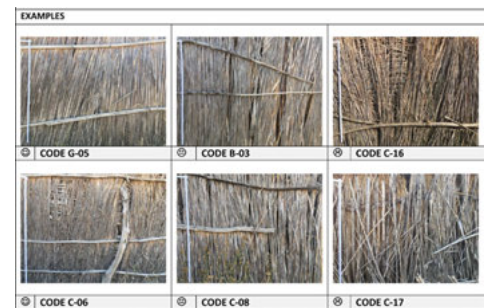


Fig. 9. Example of details collection data base (Source: EHV & Cristini, 2021).

### 6. Final discussion and conclusions

In Zaroshke village and in other villages of the Prespa Lake Area a big number and a high diversity of smaller vernacular edifices have been conserved. However, their situation is highly endangered. This is caused on one hand because their construction is

quite vulnerable and fragile, on the other hand by the fact that the traditional agriculture with a high level of self-sufficiency is expected to terminate soon since it is currently mostly practiced by people older than sixty years. Finally, the smaller vernacular edifices are endangered because they are not understood by the local community as valuable, but as a part of their every-day life (Fig. 10).



Fig.10. Final exposition of Volunteers' work in collaboration with local authorities and GFA Consulting (Source: Cristini, 2021).

A positive aspect of the aforementioned non-appreciation of these structures is that – in difference to the residential buildings which have been mostly drastically modernised during the last to decades – the auxiliary buildings are, except some smaller repairs in one or the other case, nearly completely free of recent interventions. Assuming all these aspects, the most important aim of the training course was to raise awareness among the local population and the local administration concerning the value of these structures and to understand them as an essential part of the region's material heritage. In addition, these edifices are closely linked with various forms of immaterial heritage – given by their use for the subsidiary agriculture, but also by the applied traditional construction techniques. Finally, their conservation bears relevant potential for the touristic development of the village.

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