



The historical town gjirokastër in albania

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Abstract

This work is the result of a study trip to Albania that the author took in the company of architect Ramadan Aliu in September 2012. At that time, architect Aliu was a doctoral student at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, and he worked on his doctoral dissertation (Comparative analysis of selected examples of cities in Macedonia and Albania) under the mentorship of the author. Butrint was one of the places/cities they visited. Besides Butrint, these were Berat, Durres, Gjirokastër, Kruje, Shkoder, Tirana, Vlore and many natural sights such as the famous source of The Blue Eye (Syri and Kaltër, for example). The aim of the study trip was to get to know cities on the spot and to contribute to the author's theory of „Architecturally Defined Space“ through their analysis (through 'cabinet work'). Gjirokastër is located in the southern part of Albania, on the edge of the vast Drino river valley, at the foot of the Gjerë mountain (Geographic coordinates: 40°04'43.69"N, 20°08'07.80"E, Elevation: 230 m). The first written traces mention (1336) Gjirokastër under the name Argyrokastro (Greek: Αργυρόκαστρο) meaning „Silver Castle“, which at that time was part of the Despotate of Epirus. However, archaeological findings testify to the presence of people in this area as early as the first century BC. The fortress above this town dates back to the 3rd century, and was extended in the 6th and 12th centuries. At this time, the city developed as an important trade center, Argyropolis (Ancient Greek: Ἀργυρόπολις), meaning „Silver City“. Albanians came to this area at the beginning of the 14th century after a cholera epidemic decimated the population of its previous inhabitants. The city came (1417) into the possession of the Ottoman Empire as Ergiri Kasrı, where it remained until 1913. At this time, Gjirokastër became the center of Bektashi Sufism. After the Balkan Wars, Gjirokastër was conquered by the Greeks and the city was declared the capital of their administrative unit of the Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus. Since 1921, Gjirokastër has been part of Albania. The Gjirokastër city, viewed in its natural and cultural-historical context, is an unusual creation of the symbiosis of nature and man, so it was included (in 2008) on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List as a „historical museum under the open sky“.

Keywords: Albania, Gjirokastër, Synergy of natural environment, social environment and man

1. Introduction

This work is the result of a study trip to Albania that the author took in the company of architect Ramadan Aliu in September 2012. At that time, architect Aliu was a doctoral student at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, and he worked on his doctoral dissertation (Comparative analysis of selected examples of cities in Macedonia and Albania) under the mentorship of the author. Butrint was one of the places/cities they visited. Besides Butrint, these were Berat, Durres, Gjirokastër, Kruje, Shkoder, Tirana, Vlore and many natural sights such as the famous source of The Blue Eye (Syri and Kalter, for example). The goal of the study trip was to get to know cities on the spot and to analyze them (through 'cabinet work') to contribute to the author's theory of „Architecturally Defined Space“^[1,2]. Gjirokastër is a city (with about 25,500 inhabitants) located in the southern part of Albania (Figure 1), on the edge of the vast Drino river valley, at the foot of the Gjerë mountain (Geographic coordinates: 40°04'43.69"N, 20°08'07.80"E, Elevation: 230 m).

The first written traces mention (1336) Gjirokastrë (also: Gjirokastra) under the name Argyrokastro (Greek: Αργυρόκαστρο) with the meaning „Silver Castle“, which at that time was part of the Despotate of Epirus. However, archaeological findings testify to the presence of people in this area as early as the first century BC. The fortress above this town dates back to the 3rd century, and was extended in the 6th and 12th centuries. At this time, the city developed as an important trade center, Argyropolis (Ancient Greek: Ἀργυρόπολις), meaning „Silver City“ [3,4,5]. Albanians came to this area at the beginning of the 14th century after a cholera epidemic decimated the population of its previous

inhabitants. The city came (1417) into the possession of the Ottoman Empire as Ergiri Kasrı, where it remained until 1913 [6]. At this time, Gjirokastrë became the center of Bektashi Sufism. After the Balkan wars, Gjirokastrë was conquered by the Greeks and the city was declared the capital of their administrative unit of the Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus. Since 1921, Gjirokastrë has been part of Albania [7]. The Gjirokastrë city, viewed in its natural and cultural-historical context, is an unusual creation of the symbiosis of nature and man, so it was included (in 2008) on the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage as an „open-air historical museum“ [8].



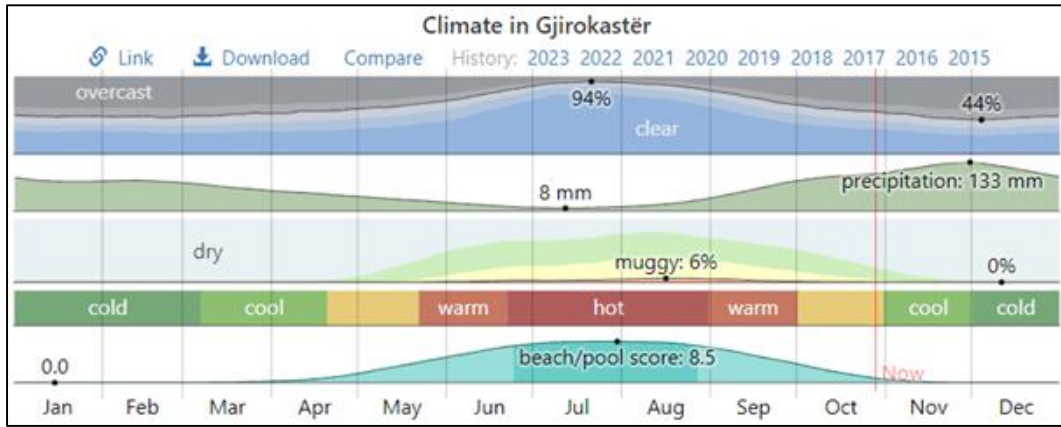
Source: Google Earth. Accessed: October 28, 2023

Fig 1: Gjirokastrë in Albania. Location

2. Natural resources and sights

According to the Köppen-Geiger classification, the prevailing climate in this region is categorized as Csa [9]. The average temperature here is 12.5 °C. About 1453 mm/m² of precipitation falls annually. The location of Gjirokastrë is in the northern hemisphere. Summer starts at the end of June and ends in September. The summer months are: June, July, August, September. In Gjirokastrë, summers are short, hot, dry and clear, and winters are long, very cold, wet and partly cloudy. During the year, the temperature usually varies from 1 °C to 32 °C and is rarely below -3 °C or above 36 °C. The hot season lasts 2.9 months, from June 12 to September 9, with an average daily temperature above 28 °C. The hottest month of the year in Gjirokastrë is July, with an average high of 32 °C and low of 17 °C. The cool season lasts for 4.0 months, from November 20 to March 20, with an average daily temperature below 14 °C. The coldest month of the year in Gjirokastrë is January, with an average minimum

temperature of 1 °C and a maximum of 10 °C (Figure 2). The chance of rainy days in Gjirokastrë varies significantly throughout the year. The wet season lasts for 6.8 months, from September 26 to April 21, with a greater than 22% chance of a given day being rainy. The month with the most rainy days in Gjirokastrë is November, with an average of 10.7 days with at least 1.00 millimeters of precipitation. The drier season lasts 5.2 months, from April 21 to September 26. The month with the fewest rainy days in Gjirokastrë is July, with an average of 1.7 days with at least 1.00 millimeters of precipitation. Among rainy days, we distinguish those that have only rain, only snow or a mixture of the two. The month with the most rainy days only in Gjirokastrë is November, with an average of 10.7 days. According to this categorization, the most common form of precipitation throughout the year is rain itself, with a peak probability of 39% on November 21 [9].



Source: Climate and Average Weather Year Round in Gjirokaštër Albania
<https://weatherspark.com/y/85523/Average-Weather-in-Gjirokašt%C3%ABr-Albania-Year-Round>, Accessed: October 28, 2023.

Fig 2: Gjirokaštër weather by month

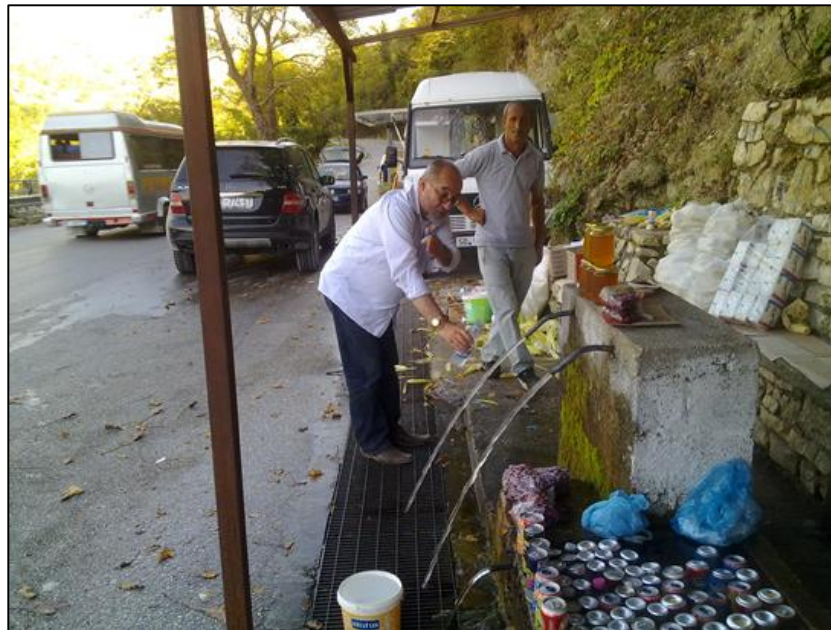
The vast fertile valley along the Drino river and the pastures on the slopes of Mount Gjerë are abundant natural resources that have generated a rich life in this area since prehistoric times. Agriculture was the basis for building a city-fort, and later a city based on Ottoman-oriental patterns of organization, with a business zone (bazaar) and residential quarters (mahalas). Mount Gjerë, due to its position in the wider natural-geographic space, generates abundant precipitation, i.e. a

wealth of sources of drinking water at its foot. It is one of the main factors for the organization of the settlement and its development and prosperity. Near Gjirokaštër, on the way to the city of Sarandë, there is one of the most generous sources of drinking water in Europe, 'Blue eye' ('Syrë and Kaltër'), (Figure 3). The surroundings of Gjirokastra abound with many rich sources of drinking water, including those along the road (Figure 4).



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 25, 2012)

Fig 3: The author of the Blue Eye water source (Syrë i kaltër) near Gjirokaštër



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 25, 2012)

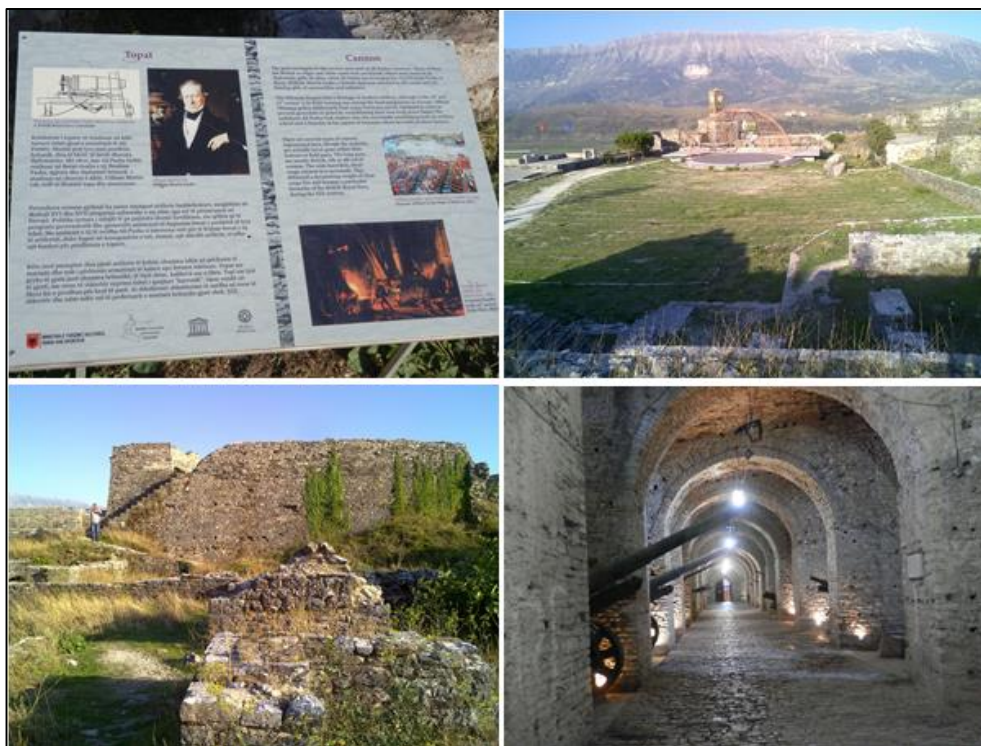
Fig 4: The author next to the public fountain and rest area near Gjirokastër

3. Architectural cultural and historical heritage

In general, Albanian architecture is a cumulus of cultures and lifestyles derived from numerous civilizations that once established themselves there: Illyrians, ancient Greece, ancient Romans, Venetians, Ottomans. Monumental Roman architecture emerged from the period of the rule of the Roman Empire in this area, architecture that now represents an important attraction when visiting the country. This is especially visible in Butrint and Dures. Perhaps the most outstanding legacy was given by the Byzantine Empire.

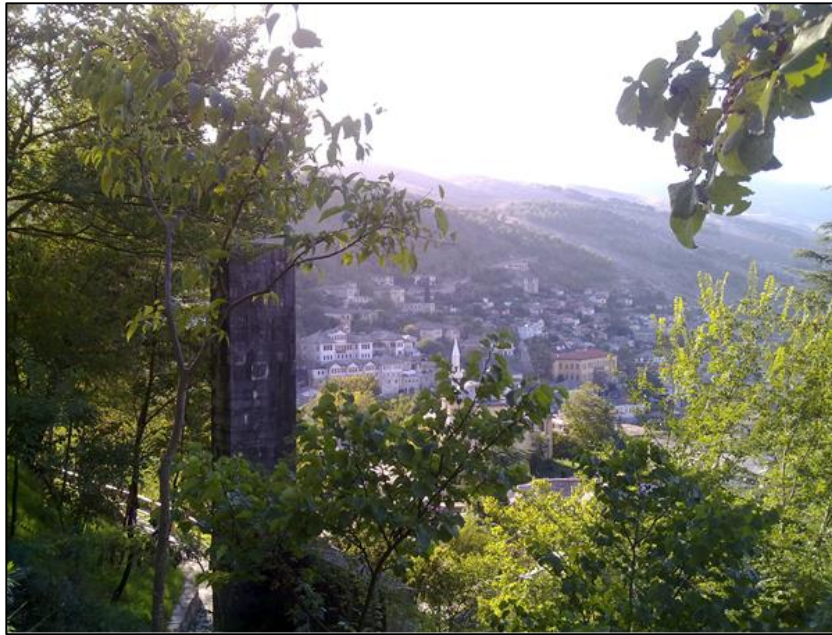
Cities and surrounding places such as Shkodër, Krujë, Korçë, Berat, Voskopojë, Gjirokastër, for example, are the architectural treasures of Albania [2].

It has already been said that Gjirokastër, due to the harmony of its urban structure and natural environment, was included in the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage [8]. On the hill above the town is a fort-museum with exhibits of tools and weapons that the communists seized from Germany during World War II (Figures 5-13).



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 5: Gjirokastër fortress



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 6: View from the Fortress on the Gjirokastër city



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 25, 2012)

Fig 7: Author at Gjirokastër Fortress

Dhuvjan Monastery (Albanian: Manastiri i Dhuvjanit, Greek: Μονή Αγίου Κηρύκου και Ιουλίττας), also known as the Monastery of Saints Quirik and Juliet (Albanian: Manastiri i Shën Qirjakut dhe Julitës) and as the Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, is a Byzantine monastery located in the western part of the village Dhuvjan, Gjirokastër

district. The monastery was built (1089) in Dropullu, in the Drin river valley, in the Dropull region ^[10] (Figure 8). The monastery is (commonly) dated to the 6th century, however, this has been disputed due to notes left by a former monk who worked at the monastery, who claimed that the monastery was built in 1089 ^[11]. It was renovated in the

1960s, and the Albanian government elevated it to the status of a cultural monument in 1963. In the summer of 2006, the inhabitants of the village announced that the descendants of the former priest of the village, Papa Vllasi, had dug up an icon from his garden. The object, described as an emblem and dated 1819, bears the names of 6 saints (Saint Julia, Theodore

Stratilat, John Chrysostom, Saint Haralampe, Saint Eleftherius and Saint Polycarp) and allegedly contains the bones of three of them. In order to prevent this very rare object from possible theft, the residents of Dhuvjan periodically change the location of the icon^[11].

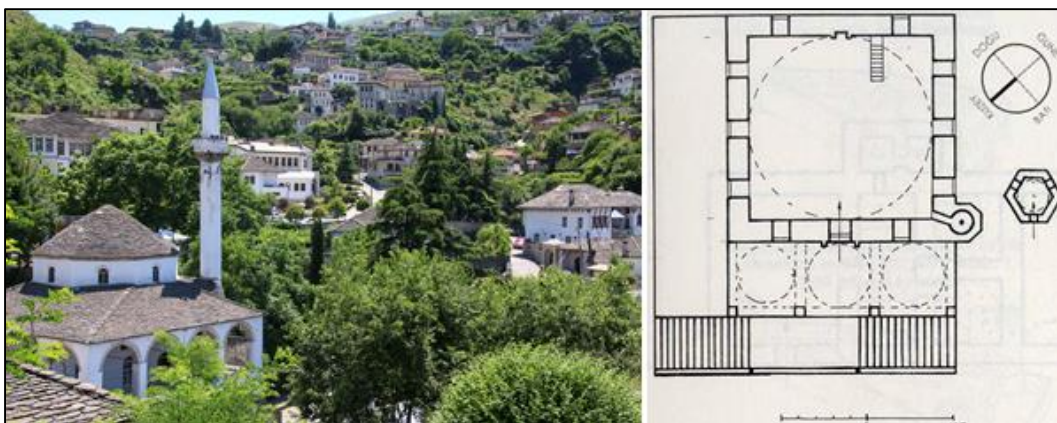


Source: <https://www.visit-gjirokastra.com/dt-places/ravena-monastery-dropull/>, Accessed: October 28, 2023.

Fig 8: Dhuvjan Monastery/Virgin Mary Monastery (Albanian: Manastiri i Dhuvjanit, Greek: Μονή Αγίου Κηρύκου καί Ιουλίττας)

Gjirokastër Mosque/Bazaar Mosque (Xhamia e Gjirokastrës/Xhamia e Pazarit), also The Memi Bey mosque (Figure 9). The mosque was built in the Ottoman period (1757) and is located in the settlement of Stara čaršija. It is one of fifteen mosques originally built in the city during the Ottoman era, thirteen of which survived until the communist period^[12]. The mosque was originally designed to be located in the New Bazaar settlement in Gjirokastër, as part of Memi Pasha's urban plan, which was built in the 17th century.

However, in the following century, it perished in a fire, except for the mosque. The Albanian government (1973) elevated the mosque to the status of „Monument of Culture“, sparing it from the totalitarian communist regime in Albania to destroy it. The remaining twelve mosques were subsequently demolished. Due to the prohibition of religion in Albania, the mosque was used as a training hall for circus acrobats who used the high domed ceilings to hang their trapezes.

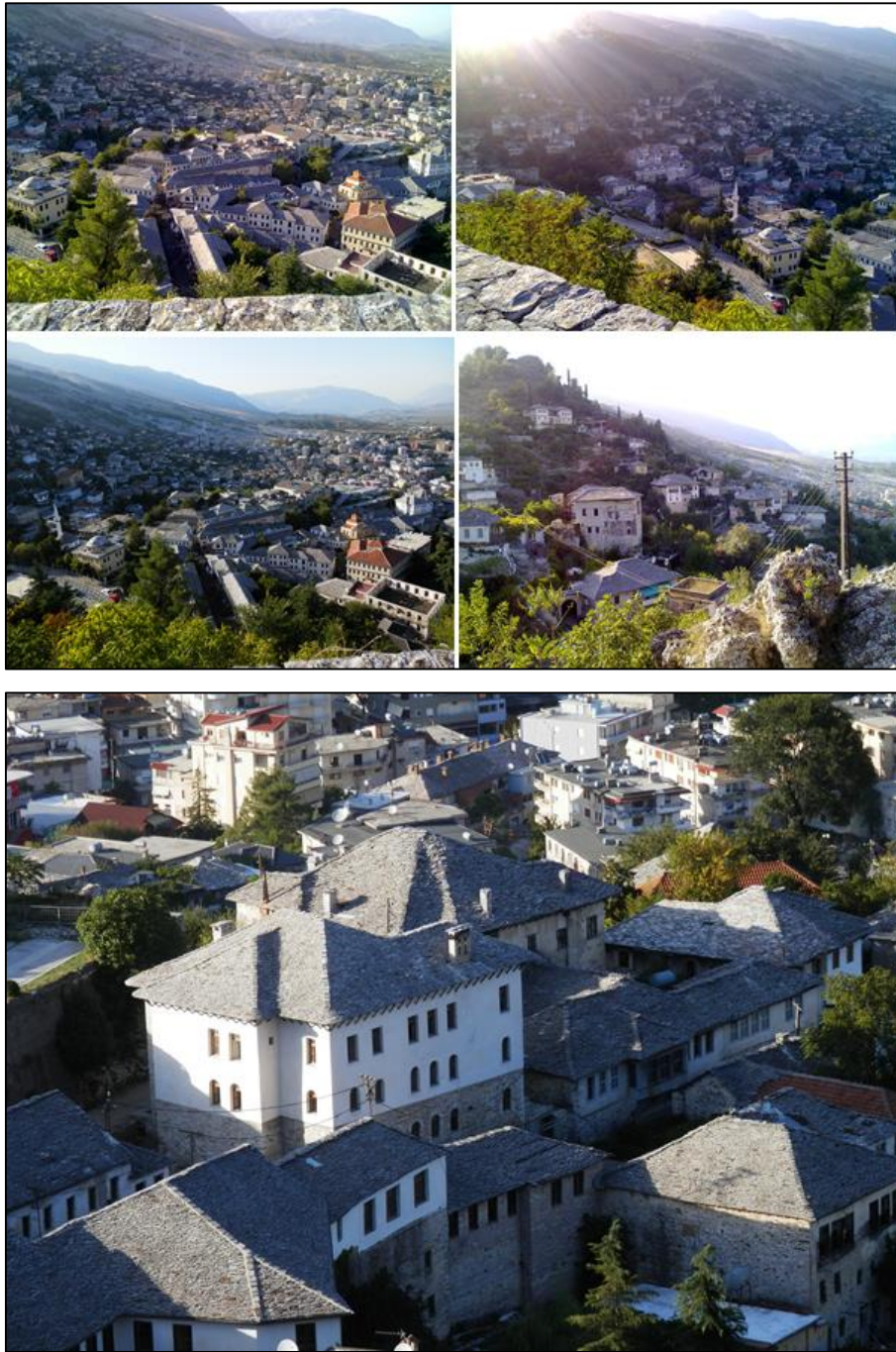


Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/26849514@N06/35593619702>, Accessed: October 28, 2023.
Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/2-The-covered-market-under-the-mosque-of-Pazar-in-Gjirokastrer-from-M-Kiel_fig50_322721683, Accessed: October 28, 2023.

Fig 9: Gjirokastër Mosque/Bazaar Mosque (Xhamia e Gjirokastrës/Xhamia e Pazarit)

Residential architecture from the period of the Ottoman Empire is extremely valuable, according to which Gjirokastër

got the name „stone town“ (Figure 10).



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 10: The Gjirokastrë city seen from its fortress

The city center of Gjirokastrë, its bazaar, has extremely high architectural and environmental values. The old bazaar in Gjirokastrë, which the locals call „Qafa e Pazarit“, forms the center of the Old Town. The history of the Bazaar goes back to the 17th century. In fact, not much remains from that period. Sources say that in the third quarter of the 19th century, the old bazaar suffered a devastating fire. After that, the bazaar was completely renovated. This is why the buildings are of the same architecture, some two-story and others three-story, but very identical in their structure, in their entire line. The first floor is where the craftsmen worked all

day and the second floor was used for different purposes in each of them. Some shops had a back door, which was used only by the owner. While a sidewalk was built in front for people, which was a rarity in other bazaars of the same period. What we have today has been preserved in the best possible way. The radial shape is very interesting when viewed from above, connecting it to many streets in the old town. Now there are still some artisans who work in the old way, and people are trying to pass the craft on to new generations (Figure 11).



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 11: Bazaar in the Gjirokastër town

The residential districts in the city of Gjirokaster (mahales) created during the Ottoman administration are a typical example of residential architecture characteristic of the Ottoman Empire (Figures 12, 13). Gjirokastër is the

birthplace of the writer Ismail Kadare (1936-), author of the book „The Fall of the Stone City“ (Figure 12). It is also the birthplace of the communist leader Enver Hoxha (1908-1985).



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 12: Ismail Kadare's house



Source: Author (September 25, 2012)

Fig 13: Mahals in the Gjirokastra town

Conclusion

Gjirokastra is an old town that testifies to a long lifespan, in continuity since the first century BC. The fortress above this town dates back to the 3rd century, and was extended in the 6th and 12th centuries. The first written traces mention (1336) Gjirokastra under the name Argyrokastra (Greek: Αργυρόκαστρο) with the meaning „Silver Castle“, which at that time was part of the Despotate of Epirus. The life of the people in Gjirokastra has been influenced for a long time by the tradition of Islam (during the Ottoman period), while at the same time incorporating more ancient influences. This way of life respected Orthodox Christian traditions, which could thus continue their spiritual and cultural development. Gjirokastra was built by large landowners. Around the ancient citadel from the 13th century, the city has houses with towers that are characteristic of the Balkan region (‘the Turkish towers’). Gjirokastra contains several outstanding examples of houses of this type, dating from the 17th century, but also more complex examples from the early 19th century.

Gjirokastra bears witness to the diversity of urban societies in the Balkans and the long-term way of life that has almost disappeared today. Gjirokastra bears witness to various types of monuments and popular urban housing during the classical Ottoman period, in continuity with the various medieval cultures that preceded it, and in a state of peaceful coexistence with a large Christian minority.

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