Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti,
Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli

Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas

The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study

FIRENZE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

PEOPLE_PLACES_ARCHITECTURE
ISSN 2975-0415 (PRINT) | ISSN 2975-027X (ONLINE)

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People _ Places _ Architecture

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2024

Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas : the village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study / Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli. – Firenze : Firenze University Press, 2024.
(People_Places_Architecture ; 3)

https://www.fupress.com/isbn/9791221504361

ISSN 2975-0415 (print)
ISSN 2975-027X (online)
ISBN 979-12-215-0435-4 (Print)
ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1 (PDF)
ISBN 979-12-215-0437-8 (ePUB)
ISBN 979-12-215-0438-5 (XML)
DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

Graphic design: Alberto Pizarro Fernández, Lettera Meccanica SRLs
Front cover image: © Flavia Veronesi

The series People_Places_Architecture is promoted by the Interdepartmental Research Unit Florence Accessibility Lab of the University of Florence (see https://www.dida.unifi.it/vp-136-fal.html).

This book is based on the research "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage", funded by the Italian Agency of Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans, Tiranë.

Published by Firenze University Press
Firenze University Press
Università degli Studi di Firenze
via Cittadella, 7, 50144 Firenze, Italy
www.fupress.com

This book is printed on acid-free paper
Printed in Italy

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People_Places_Architecture book series

The *People_Places_Architecture* book series aims to provide a dialogue space for scholars mindful of social and environmental responsibility in the process of creating *spaces for interaction*.

Spaces for interaction are incubators of community, as well as ethical and human values and the places where social and everyday life happens. They are privileged scenarios where a community represents itself in cultural, economic, social, technological and ecological terms and manifests its contradictions. For those who use them, the meaning of these places goes far beyond the physical space with which they are identified.

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Credits

Antonio Laurìa (AL)	PI of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Supervisor of the book. Author and editor (with FA, GP and PM) of the book. Author of the Executive Summary, Chapter 2, Sections 3.1 and 4.1. Author (with PAM) of Chapter 6. Author (with MR) of the alternative text descriptions of the images for visually impaired people. Author of photographs included in the book.
Francesco Alberti (FA)	Member of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Author and editor (with AL, GP and PM) of the book. Author (with EN) of Section 1.1. and (with MR) of Sections 4.2 and 4.3. Author of photographs included in the book.
Pietro Matracchi (PM)	Member of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Author and editor (with AL, FA and GP) of the book. Author of Section 3.3. Author of photographs included in the book.
Gabriele Paolinelli (GP)	Member of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Author and editor (with AL, FA and PM) of the book. Author of Section 1.1. and of Chapter 5. Author (with FV) of Section 3.2. Author of photographs included in the book and sketches in Chapter 5.

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Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

Pier Angelo Mori (PAM)	Author (with AL) of Chapter 6.
Eni Nurihana (EN)	Author (with FA) of Section 1.1. Translations from Albanian. Review of the Albanian texts in the book. Author of images, maps and diagrams included in the book.
Mirko Romagnoli (MR)	Collaborator of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Author (with FA) of Sections 4.2 and 4.3. Author (with FV) of photographs included in the book and drawings in chapter 4. Author (with AL) of the alternative text descriptions of the images for visually impaired people.
Flavia Veronesi (FV)	Collaborator of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorization of the Natural and Cultural Heritage". Author (with GP) of Sections 3.2. Author (with MR) of photographs included in the book, sketches in Chapter 4 and the cover photo.
Ardian Ndreca	Author of the book's preface.
Stefania Vizzaccaro	Author of the book's foreword.
Rebecca Milner	Translator of the manuscript into English.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to those who have helped to make this book possible. Each of them played a valuable role and deserves our sincere appreciation.

First of all, we would like to thank Mirko Romagnoli and Flavia Veronesi, members of the working group of the research project "Develop Community Resources through the Valorisation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage", for their commitment and dedication. Mirko and Flavia worked with us with passion and motivation during the various stages that led from the research project to the book.

Dritan Kapo, an architect in Tiranë, was of great help to us in the acquisition of thematic cartography of the area under study and its interpretation. Dritan also collaborated with Fabrizio Battisti, a dear and competent colleague from our Department of Architecture, in estimating the cost of the works envisaged in the preliminary design of the path from Kadiu Bridge to the village of Bënjë.

We would like to pay tribute to three people who have made a valuable contribution to the book:

- Pier Angelo Mori is the co-author of the final chapter of the book, and he discussed with us, with the generosity and competence that comes from years of study and research on social cooperation, some important issues related to the process of village regeneration from a socio-economic point of view.
- Ardian Ndreca wrote the beautiful preface to the book, expressing with passion and nostalgia his love for his land; we are truly grateful to him for the sensitivity and rigour with which he approached our work and for his generous words about our book.
- Eni Nurihana played a valuable role in the realisation of the manuscript: she co-authored a chapter, translated some texts from Albanian into Italian, and with care and professionalism prepared several drawings and diagrams included in the book.

It is a great pleasure for us to thank Stefania Vizzaccaro, Director of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans in Tiranë, who believed in our work and supported it wholeheartedly. We would also like to thank her for her kind and generous foreword to this book.

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Among her staff, a special mention goes to Francesco Guerzoni for the quality and continuity of his participation throughout the development of our work. Francesco never failed to support us in overcoming all the challenges we faced in the course of our work. We greatly appreciated his professionalism and kindness.

During the demanding on-site analysis of the research project, we were able to count on the substantive and friendly help of the staff of the Italian NGO CESVI (Përmet). Our special thanks go to Giorgio Ponti and his staff members: Julian Elezi, Ardian Gogo, Fiorent Jace, Jonid Jace, Aleks Tane and Elidjon Thanasi.

In Përmet, we were also able to count on the cooperation and generous hospitality of Sotir Nauni, the last primary school teacher in the village of Bënjë. It was a privilege to meet him and talk to him about life in the village.

Our sincere thanks also go to those who kindly and generously provided us with ideas, information, documentation and suggestions. It is difficult to list everyone who has contributed to making this book more informative, but we would particularly like to thank Daniel Pirushi, Berijan Premto and Aleks Todhe.

We would also like to thank Rebecca Milner, who translated the manuscript into English, for her patience and valuable advice and suggestions.

Finally, we would like to express our great appreciation to Eranda and Sania Shpata, the owners of the Familjari Restaurant in Përmet, where we so often found a cosy and hospitable refuge after a hard day's work.

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti,
Pietro Matracchi and Gabriele Paolinelli,
Firenze, September 2024.

Foreword

Stefania Vizzaccaro

The Italian Agency for Development Cooperation - AICS, which I am proud to represent in the Western Balkans since December 2021, counts the sector of cultural heritage development and preservation among its priorities.

In fact, according to the Agency's latest three-year programme for 2021-2023 and consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, "culture plays an important role in promoting social cohesion, freedom of expression, identity building, civic responsibility, and cultural dialogue. It strengthens communities and contributes to the construction of resilient, peaceful and stable societies. It promotes economic development, local production and job creation." Moreover, "safeguarding cultural heritage, which the OECD DAC Peer Review recognised as being characteristic of Italian Cooperation, a sector where Italy has the capacity to generate added value, is a priority."

AICS is therefore very active – both in Albania and in the remaining Western Balkan countries under its jurisdiction (Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) – with projects concerning development and the preservation of cultural heritage. Projects funded both by the European Union, whose management is delegated to AICS, and directly by the Italian government.

Returning to the added value that Italy, according to the OECD DAC Peer Review, can bring to the cultural sector, this is also possible thanks to the numerous Italian organisations that are involved in AICS activities on a daily basis. I am referring to civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, foundations, research institutions and universities working directly in the territory.

Italy, in fact, thanks to its millennial cultural and architectural tradition, is capable of being particularly sensitive and proactive in promoting the best models of cultural development adopted within the country. It is capable of combining the development of culture with an increase in tourism, a sustainable and responsible tourism, that takes into account the particular context in which it is set and is capable of bringing benefits to the economy, creating jobs for local communities.

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The organisations and excellences of the "Italy System" mentioned above include the University of Florence, a partner of AICS in a programme it finances called "Develop Community Resources through the Valorisation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage."

The architectural and scientific research presented in this book is also part of this programme, in particular the redevelopment of the path that leads from the thermal baths on the Lëngarica River, a well-known tourist attraction, to the village of Bënjë, introduced by the ancient and evocative Architectural Complex of St Mary.

The intuition of the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence was to come up with the idea of channelling some of the many tourists who already flock to the thermal baths on a daily basis to a place of great cultural interest, but one that is still not very well known to most and is unfortunately experiencing depopulation, such as the village of Bënjë.

Speaking more generally about the remarkable research work presented in this book, I was immediately able to appreciate the sensitivity and delicacy with which it was conducted.

A sensitivity and love for the places in the Vjosa Valley, a wonderful area where history, nature, culture, art and architecture come together and tell stories that are ancient, but at the same time new and unheard.

My sincere thanks go to Prof. Antonio Laurìa and all the staff of the Department of Architecture, which he coordinates, and I recommend this book to anyone who reads it.

PREFACE

Building community from the landscape

Ardian Ndreca

It is known that the interpenetration of scientific languages and methodologies highlights the object of study more fully and allows its truth to emerge in a more complete form. It so happens that in one book you find ideas for many other books.

A century ago, when the concept of interdisciplinarity did not exist, several essays and scientific contributions were needed to understand a little-known territory like Albania. Mention should be made here *en passant* of actual studies, but also of important notes on exploration trips by well-known figures such as Antonio Baldacci, Amedeo Giannini, Roberto Almagià, Alessandro Serra, Filippo Tajani, Pellegrino C. Sestieri, Ferdinando Milone, etc., who contributed to the study of aspects including the territory, economy, agriculture, geography, geology and urban planning of 20th-century Albania.

The research presented in this book, led by Antonio Laurìa, despite focusing on a limited territory, is an example of how a territorial palimpsest can be studied using appropriate tools, allowing a truth safeguarded over the centuries by a community such as Bënjë's to be revealed in its full qualitative spectrum.

The choice of the object of this study is a happy one. We can affirm that the *ideal type* (Max Weber) that emerges from this study represents a valid support for further conceptualisations of other rural contexts in the south of Albania, as it contains characteristics that unite the life of the area in its multiplicity of forms: architectural, urban, landscape, cultural, religious, economic, and historical.

This immersion in the territory of Bënjë allows us to perceive a value that is not always taken for granted in scientific research: the love with which the reading of the places and inhabitants was conducted. This has nothing to do with a certain fetishisation of a territory sometimes found in some Balkan studies, as it draws only on the love of knowledge.

The authors listened and perceived the truth of that territory, each with their own method and respecting certain priorities. Everything stems from a "walk", which is reminiscent of the words of the scientist Hermann von Helmholtz who stated that the best things come to mind while "walking along a slightly uphill street."

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Indeed, any course of study conducted with a truly scientific method in the fields of architecture, urban planning, philosophy and urban sociology is almost always "uphill" in Albania. There is no established tradition of specific studies in these areas. For some areas, there are systematic surveys, attempts at conceptualisation, but no exploratory readings guided by valid methods.

The merit of this book is its attempt to promote and enhance the area, as the meticulous analysis is followed by concrete proposals for the future. In this light, we must also grasp the careful reflections on the rapid transformation of the territorial structure and the negative impact of chaotic urbanisation and hydraulic transformations with catchment and damming works in the Vojussa area.

An examination of courses of action for the future and the strategic objectives focus on the dialectic of *uti et frui*, adapted to the conditions in which the entire Rhaetian apparatus is intertwined with the built space, the latter centred around the architectural complex of the Church of St Mary in Bënjë. The absence of a square in the village is evidence of a lack of a dualism in the institutionalisation of the society and places the attention primarily back on the church, which, with its aggregation rituals, could once again become the starting point not only for the redevelopment of the complex but above all for the enhancement of the entire village.

The two major risks for that territory are depopulation and "explosive and chaotic" urbanisation, the latter being a consequence of the former due to a lack of real planning and a local development vision. This study starts off as an examination of the power to build in the recent history of a community, and then moves into concrete proposals that deal with the recovery of existing networks and the redevelopment and functional conversion of specific parts of the built-up area.

Thanks to the political changes of the 1990s, first and foremost the political opening of Albania, but also due to technological innovation and the renewal of the connection network throughout the south, the entire area has repositioned itself geopolitically, assuming a certain contiguity with the central part of the country. For instance, the rediscovery of the convivial space that starts from the church parvis and concerns the village festivals and the nearby thermal baths, not only involves the inhabitants of Bënjë, including those who have moved to other urban areas, but all potential tourists and visitors from the entire southern area. The great change that has occurred in recent decades is the enlarged scale of the context in which a small village like Bënjë is situated. This is likely to lead in the near future to living in the territory and making rational use of its resources, which does not happen at present due to the low human presence.

A question that affects the whole of Albanian society is how to rebuild the lost mountain and rural communities? Agriculture and the tertiary sector are the driving forces for tourism which starts an inverse process to the depopulation of the 1990s.

This study diachronically examines how space in Bënjë has been architecturally constructed and socially enlivened, allowing the places to tell their own story. The next step is to create the conditions for a new culture, for "reflective living" (Paul Ricoeur) that recovers the memory of building and creates a new memory for the future. One thing is clear: no one returns to Bënjë as they left. I am not referring to each person's greater investment capacity, but rather the ethos of the city that is now present in those who intend to return and that allows places that could not produce a certain mentality to live today according to a more evolved and open *Weltanschauung*. There has been mention of the advantage that the "neo-ruralists" (Sophie Bonin) have over traditional peasants in profoundly embracing norms and regulations concerning ecology and landscape, enriching peasant life with new inspiration that goes beyond a traditional peasant's symbiotic and utilitarian relationship with nature.

Each day we encounter great transformations, but in this process there is no threshold of completion that finally allows us to embark on what is desired in this study. We must not wait for any miracles; on the contrary, we risk missing the kairotic moment.

We are aware that the *glikò* of Bënjë, or the famous mulberry tree of Boboshtica, the Kallmet vine in the Zadrima plain and Skrapar's raki, are not enough to speak of counter-trends and the eco-sustainable development of those territories. However, material and community regeneration also involves the symbols of places, which are loaded with meanings that can reawaken interest in tradition.

In all this, we have not forgotten the landscape, whose scenic expressiveness has been described in lyrical and technical detail by the authors of this valuable study. They speak of an "agro-silva-pastoral mosaic" left to go wild due to the lack of human intervention, but equally exposed to the many dangers of capitalism which in those parts is still reluctant to recognise the importance of the ecosystem.

A serious questioning of the concept of landscape organically intertwines the natural and cultural levels, so that the enjoyment of the landscape context is a profound and complete experience, irreducible to the individual components that narrow the visual plane and impoverish the scenic view.

The Bënjë area is fortunate to have the Lëngarica Canyon, an eco-symbol converging with a landscape rich in naturalistic details, attracting more and more visitors and tourists.

It requires less effort to intimately grasp the horizon marked by the *ecology of the gaze*, as it is called by the Gibsonian school, than explore the cultural level of a landscape that conveys secular values such as, for example, that of the Orthodox religion, which, as we know, does not represent the majority of Albanians. So even the complex experience of the landscape requires gradualness and differentiated conceptual devices to constitute itself as such. As in any voyage of discovery, we must keep in mind the visitor's spiritual and mental predisposition in order to avoid simplifications and a passive gaze.

A true landscape marks the difference with the rest of an environment that has been completely rationalised; the landscape, however, remains perceptually vague and does not have its own marked perimeter. There is a boundary within which the elements that make up the landscape do not contain structures or objects that openly clash with its configuration. Lastly, as Michael Jakob pointed out, "the landscape is the artificial result of a culture that perpetually redefines its relationship with nature."

In Bënjë, as elsewhere, we must be careful not to produce just a landscape history, but rather an urban philosophy and a landscape philosophy capable of expressing empathy towards the eco-landscape.

To consider the landscape and culture of a community, a heritage for future generations, ultimately we must become contemplative when it comes to the encounter. Modern history has shown that Bacon's *vexatio naturae*, even if conducted for good in order to bring out the riches and beauty, violates the rhythms of nature, which has its landscape epiphanies but also likes to hide behind sad and bleak repertoires. A landscape is still interesting even when it does not correspond to the classical canons of beauty. Forcing it to show itself as more beautiful means disrespecting its hiding. Finally, a landscape also understands its own death.

This book speaks enthusiastically of a journey where nature and culture are evoked, and where the landscape is not the ceremonial costume of nature, but the purpose of our living, the experience of a totality of which we are a part.

Executive Summary

Antonio Laurìa

This book describes a research carried out by the Department of Architecture (DIDA) of the University of Florence within the framework of the "Develop Community Resources through the Valorisation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage" programme. This programme, founded by the Italian Government and promoted and managed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans in Tiranë, contributes to the effective implementation of the *Strategic Plan for Development and Integration 2015-2020 – NSDI* of the Albanian Government, Albania's most important strategic document in view of joining the European Union.

In particular, the research aims to initiate a process of sustainable and socially inclusive development in the Albanian village of Bënjë, in the municipality of Përmet, Gjirokastër County.

In a previous study (Laurìa *et al*., 2020), a set of coordinated interventions (strategies and actions) aimed at the regeneration of Bënjë through the recovery and enhancement of its cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) was defined.

The objectives of the research presented here are as follows: (1) identify within this set of interventions the most effective and feasible one to achieve the given objective with the available resources, and (2) prepare the narrative master plan and preliminary design of the selected intervention.

Of the various options available it was decided, in consultation with the client, to focus on the rehabilitation of the road leading from the thermal area near the Kadiu Bridge over the Lëngarica River to the village.

The book is divided into two parts.

The first part ("Cognitive framework") consists of three chapters.

Chapter 1 ("For a reading of the territory") defines the territorial and landscape framework of Përmet, the municipality in which the village of Bënjë is located. It is made up of two sections: in the first, Francesco Alberti and Eni Nurihana critically trace the evolution of the territory and provide an overview of the strategic and spatial planning entrusted to its future development; in the second, Gabriele Paolinelli offers a lively description of the landscapes drawn by the Vjosa River and its tributaries.

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In Chapter 2 ("Bënjë: a village and its people"), Antonio Laurìa gives an overview of the historical, cultural and social events, as well as the landscape, settlement and architectural aspects that characterise the village. Particular attention is paid to the description of the relationship between Bënjë and its inhabitants over time, to the Architectural Complex of St Mary, which has always represented the heart of the village, and to a number of places that have played an important role in the daily life of the villagers.

Chapter 3 ("A path to Bënjë") introduces the object of study – the path connecting the thermal area to the village – in its environmental context. After a brief introduction by Antonio Laurìa, who outlines the coordinates of the design intervention, Gabriele Paolinelli and Flavia Veronesi offer a detailed description of the ecological and naturalistic, historical and archaeological, scenic and panoramic features that characterise the path. In the third and concluding section, Pietro Matracchi reflects on the dense network of ancestral paths that criss-cross the territory, drawing attention to both minute and diffuse elements and to the monumental landmarks that characterise the path under study in a 'logical' relationship with the orographic and geological conditions of the environment.

The second part of the book ("Results") also consists of three chapters.

Chapter 4. ("The project proposal") presents the design experience carried out by the DIDA research group. In the first section, Antonio Laurìa describes the methodology that lies behind the project, while in the second and third sections Francesco Alberti and Mirko Romagnoli illustrate the preliminary design of the path and its arrival point in the village: the external spaces of the Architectural Complex of St Mary and, in particular, the eastern part of the church parvis.

In Chapter 5. ("Early elements for a Lëngarica River Greenway"), Gabriele Paolinelli explores the theme of greenways through the case study of the lower Lëngarica River Valley, illustrating a methodological and operational proposal that could form the basic core of subsequent interventions to be implemented in the Vjosa River Valley.

In Chapter 6. ("What future for Bënjë?"), Antonio Laurìa and Pier Angelo Mori illustrate some hypotheses and conditions for the activation of a possible process of regeneration of Bënjë and its territory.

PART I. COGNITIVE FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER 1

The context

1.1 For a reading of the territory

Francesco Alberti, Eni Nurihana

Abstract: This chapter is divided into two sections. The first covers the evolution of the territory of Përmet, the municipality where the village of Bënjë is located. The interpretative keys of the *land palimpsest* and *territorial heritage* are used to highlight the permanent and persistent elements of the natural and man-made landscape that define its identity. After illustrating the spatial and strategic planning principles and instruments, which are highly centralised in Albania, their application in the municipality of Përmet is described as the framework for the design study presented in the second part of the volume. The second section describes the landscapes to which the Vjosa River and its tributaries belong, united by the identity and value conferred by the high level of naturalness of the watercourses. This widespread characteristic is an internationally recognised feature, and its protection and enhancement require a prudent strategic and operational interpretation of both the critical aspects and potential.

1.1.1 Introduction to Përmet

Perveç detit, kemi gjithçka tjeter ("Apart from the sea, we have everything else") – with these words, which stand out on a sign clearly visible from the main entrance to the town – Përmet welcomes visitors arriving from the SH75 National Road, [Fig. 1.1] emphasising, for self-promotional purposes, the strength of this inland area of Albania, in south-eastern County of Gjirokastër: the great richness and variety of its territorial resources [Fig. 1.2].

In geographic studies and related disciplines, the notion of territory is closely linked to the dynamic and interactive relationship between settled communities and the physical environment in which they operate (Turco, 1988), processes of anthropic appropriation and the signification of space which, through the succession of different

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

Figure 1.1 – Urban arrangement at the entrance to Përmet.

historical phases, make it the «medium of communication, [...] means and object of work, production, exchange, cooperation» (Dematteis, 1985: 74).

> In pre-industrial societies, these processes necessarily took place in the constant search for a balance between the alterations made and the natural forces acting on the site, that is, as Norberg-Schulz (1979) summarised, in respect of the *genius loci*. This acknowledgement gives rise to the definition of territory proposed by Magnaghi (2000; 2020) as the result of the cyclical "co-evolution", with its alternating development phases and moments of crisis, between the culture expressed by human societies and the nature of geophysical contexts.

The stratified nature of the territory as a cultural product, whose mosaic also includes the most markedly natural areas, is referred to in the metaphors of *land palimpsest* and *territorial heritage*, used to qualify the long-term effects of human-environment inter-

Figure 1.2 – Gjirokastër County and its municipalities. [Author: Eni Nurihana].

action in terms of semantics and values. In the first case, the territory is compared to an ancient parchment on which traces of successive rewritings and erasures are legible, corresponding to different forms of spatial organisation and socio-economic models (Corboz, 1985). In the second case, the emphasis is placed on those traces, not only material, whose permanence or persistence over time testifies to a particularly harmonious relationship established between the various components and which are to be handed down to future generations as fundamental in conferring identity to places and, at least potentially, in the production of endogenous wealth for settled communities (Magnaghi, 2000).

Returning to the message that greets tourists upon their arrival in Përmet, the "everything else" (apart from the sea) that the area boasts it can offer certainly includes the natural landmarks constituted by the ecological corridors of the Vjosa [Fig. 1.3] – considered the last wild river in Europe (Doka & Qiriazi, 2022) – and the Lëngarica tributary, with its 11 km of canyons and numerous thermal springs that have always been used for their curative properties; [Fig. 1.4] the geographical features of the 12 km long Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë Mountain Range, whose peak Maja e Papingut (2,482 m) is the highest in southern Albania, and the hilly and mountainous landscape, with its strong Mediterranean characteristics, which covers intermediate altitudes between 400 and 1,800 metres above sea level, partly included in the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park.

Figure 1.3 – The Vjosa Valley near Përmet.

Figure 1.4 – Hilly landscape along the Lëngarica River; in the background, the Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë Mountain Range.

Figure 1.5 – The urban park along the Vjosa in Përmet.

It also entirely includes the municipal capital itself, with its recently redeveloped large pedestrian public spaces and the urban park on the Vjosa waterfront, [Fig. 1.5] adorned with flowerbeds following a well-established custom that has earned Përmet the nickname of *Qyteti i Trëndafilave* ("the city of roses"). The presence within the municipality of important state cultural assets – bridges dating back to the period of Ottoman rule and religious structures from different periods – and its relative proximity to the UNESCO site of Gjirokastër[1] are additional factors that make the area attractive to tourists.

If, however, we reread that slogan under the lens of territorial heritage, the "stock of opportunities" (Barel, 1981) available to activate social enhancement strategies also through the sustainable tourism lever (Dematteis & Governa, 2005) is further enriched, going on to include elements of the land palimpsest that are now less legible, in precarious conditions or difficult to access, but that have played an essential role in shaping local identity. Starting with what remains of the widespread rural settlement in the innermost areas of the municipality [Fig. 1.6] and of the arrangements and artefacts associated with the agricultural and pastoral activities to which the population has dedicated itself for centuries, the network of paths between villages and leading to the mountain pastures (*kullota*), the supply and use of water resources, and hydrogeological defence.

The territorial heritage also includes the ancient knowledge, which has now almost completely disappeared, relied on by the construction and artisan practices of the past, and the food and wine traditions, which are still very much alive today and supported by quality local supply chains: it is no coincidence that Albania's first Slow Food product was a fruit-based sweet speciality from Përmet, *gliko*.[2]

[1] See < https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/569 > (2024-01-27).

[2] See <https://www.fondazioneslowfood.com/it/presidi-slow-food/gliko-di-permet/> (2024-01-27). A detailed description of the traditions, social practices, construction and craft techniques, and food and wine culture of the Përmet area can be found in Laurìa *et al.*, 2020.

Figure 1.6 – The village of Leusë.

Përmet is within the *Tosk* cultural and dialectal area, which extends to the southern part of Albania and some territories of North Macedonia, separated from the *Gheg* area, in the northern part of the country, by the River Shkumbin, which runs through the city of Elbasan (Adams, 1997; Fortson IV, 2010; Matvejević, 2020). The intangible values of *Tosk* folk culture incorporate iso-polyphonic music, which was included in UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list in 2005.[3] It is widespread in different areas of the country and within some ancient Albanian communities abroad, but here in Përmet its best known and most influential codifier and interpreter was the clarinet player and composer Laver Bariu (1929-2014).

Unlike the sea, whose intensive exploitation in cities along the Albanian coastline has been a strong driver of development (although with destructive effects on the original environment, similar to what has happened in other coastal areas of the Mediterranean), the resources Përmet is rich in have not prevented its economic marginalisation nor halted its depopulation, which became more marked after the fall of the communist regime. In the district of Përmet (an administrative division from 1998 to the 2015 reform, coinciding in extent with the current municipality), the demographic decline between the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st was indeed among the highest in Albania, with the resident population having a negative balance of 44.63% between 1989 and 2011 (Doka & Qiriazi, 2022).

These resources can, however, represent a strength in the construction of strategies based on the paradigm of sustainable development, within the framework of a "territorial project" (Magnaghi, 2020): a project aimed at maximising the "added value for the region" (Dematteis, 2001) deriving at the same time from their specificity and communicability towards the outside, according to what can be defined as a "glocalist" approach (Bauman, 2005).

[3] See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/albanian-folk-iso-polyphony-00155> (2024-01-27).

This is the approach of both the initiatives in the field of environmental tourism and the promotion of typical local products carried out *in situ* by the Italian NGO CESVI [Fig. 1.7] and the studies on the enhancement of tangible cultural heritage supported by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development and conducted by the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, of which this publication documents a contribution. [Fig. 1.8]

Figure 1.7 – The incubator centre of typical local products in Përmet run by the NGO CESVI.

Figure 1.8 – Prof. Antonio Laurìa presents the research project "Five Albanian villages" at a public meeting in the Multifunctional Centre of Përmet. (2 July 2021).

1.1.2 The evolution of the territory

In the human-environmental co-evolution process that has affected the area which is now part of the municipality of Përmet, over the centuries three closely interrelated factors have played a fundamental role in the various phases of territorial structuring and de-structuring (or – according to Magnaghi, 2001 – "territorialization" and "de-territorialization"), shaping the palimpsest as it has been handed down to us.

The first factor is the abundant presence of water, a vital element par excellence and *conditio sine qua non* for the foundation and development of human settlements. [Fig. 1.9] The origin of the place name Përmet is related to water: it derives from the dialectal form "përm eti" of the verb "prenetjen" – to quench one's thirst: a precious opportunity the place offers to wayfarers (Pistrick, 2015) thanks to the presence of a widespread hydrographic network converging on the Vjosa River course.

Figure 1.9 – The Vjosa River basin in southern Albania. [Author Eni Nurihana].

The Vjosa (*Aóos* in Greek; *Voiussa* in its now obsolete Italianised form) is identified as early as the 11th century with the name *Shuzza*, as the widest watercourse in the region (corresponding to ancient Epirus) by the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi, author of the first map of Europe[4] (Bresc & Nef, 1999). It runs through the territory of Përmet for roughly 47 of its 272 km, which flow from its source on Mount Pindus in Greece to the mouth in the Strait of Otranto, forming together with its tributaries Lëngarica and Lum i Çarshovës the structuring system of its anthropic organisation. Although it is the only major European river that has never been significantly altered by man, the fact that its floods

[4] This is the *Tabula Rogeriana*, created by Al-Idrisi for King Roger II of Sicily, which for at least three centuries was the most accurate representation of the world as it was known.

made the surrounding land fertile has been instrumental in the development of agriculture in the valley bottom by settled communities, presumably from the 7th century BC.[5]

The first rock settlements in southern Albania were however located along the Lëngarica canyon, in the territory of Bënjë, as early as the Eneolithic period (3000-2100 BC): the Pëllumbave and Bënjës Caves [Fig. 1.10] in which the remains of utensils and ceramic vessels were found, similar to those discovered around 40 km further north in the sites of Mat and Tren, in the territory of Korça (Andrea, 1983-1984; Saliu, 2011).[6] It is assumed that the caves were abandoned in the Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, following the construction of the first villages (Saliu, 2011), such as the fortified village of Dedejan, at the foot of nearby Mount Nemërçkë, of which some remains survive. Other finds from the period were discovered in an agricultural area a short distance from Përmet, near the village of Piskova (Andrea, 1983-1984).[7]

Figure 1.10 – The Cave of Bënjës (*left*) at the mouth of the Lëngarica Canyon.

The spread of settlements in the hinterland – which from the Bronze Age, through the Byzantine period, would reach its peak during the Ottoman rule (15th-19th centuries) – was also made possible by the great availability of water provided by the smaller waterways.

The geographic location on the border between present-day Albania and Greece is the second decisive factor in the evolution of the Përmet area, characterising it as a place of transit, exchanges and clashes between different peoples and cultures – starting, in protohistoric times, with those between the Illyrian and Greek tribes settled along the Vjosa. On the other hand, a distinctive trait that can still be recognised today in the inhabitants of Përmet (Laurìa *et al.*, 2020) is their sense of hospitality towards outsiders, which derives from a centuries-old tradition of hospitality, reflected, as we have seen, in its very name.

In addition to the connection provided by the river corridor, the area was already affected in antiquity by flows from other important routes between the regions of Asia Minor and south-eastern Europe and the Adriatic Sea, passing through present-day Albania. These include, to the north, the thousand-year-old route from the Bosphorus area, past

[5] See < https://memolaproject.eu/vjosa/archaeology > (2024-01-27).

[6] See § 2.1.1.

[7] See < https://memolaproject.eu/vjosa/archaeology > (2024-01-27).

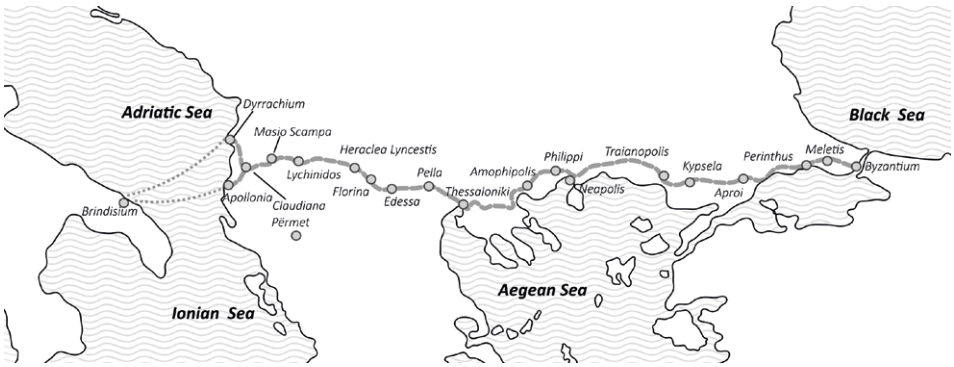


Figure 1.11 – The route of Via Egnatia. [Drawing by Eni Nurihana].

Figure 1.12 – The remains of the Kelçyra Fort, overlooking the Vjosa Valley.

the plains of Thrace and Macedonia, across the Balkan Peninsula to the coast. Used by the Romans to conquer the region, it was transformed by them into a consular road – the Via Egnatia [Fig. 1.11] – with the establishment of the province of Macedonia (148-146 BC). The Via Egnatia, together with the military road along the Danube (*Limes danubiano*), was «one of the two main overland routes of settlement from Asia Minor to Western Europe» (Fasolo, 2021: 119). From its terminal, the port of Apollonia, a centre of Illyrian origin located on the right bank near the mouth of the Vjosa, it was possible to reach Brundisium (Brindisi) by sea on the shortest route and from there take the Via Appia towards Rome. Another important junction along the river, a short distance from Përmet, was the Fort of Kelçyra, of which a few ruins remain overlooking the gorge of the same name on the Vjosa. [Fig. 1.12] Founded in the 4th-3rd century B.C., it was connected to the Via Egnatia by a route via Berat, another ancient, fortified centre which was rebuilt several times until its final layout in the 13th century and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005.[8] In the 14th century, after a period of decline following the fall of

[8] See < https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/569 > (2024-01-27).

the Roman Empire, the Via Egnatia was once again the main infrastructure used by the new Ottoman rulers to conquer this part of the Balkans (Pedani 2006).

Further south, another strategic route connected the Greek hinterland, through Epirus, with the ports of Aulon (present-day Vlorë) and Onchesmo (Sarandë), both dating back to the 6th century BC. The city of Antigonea was founded on this route, near the Vjosa River, in the 3rd century BC, [Fig. 1.13] whose archaeological area is classified by the National Institute of Cultural Heritage *(Instituti Kombëtar i Trashëgimisë Kulturore* - IKTK) as a Category I National Monument.[9] In the Byzantine era, the Castle of Gijrokastër was built later slightly further downstream. This was the original nucleus of the town of the same name, which would become one of the most flourishing markets in the Ottoman Empire between the 15th and 19th centuries. [Fig. 1.14]

Figure 1.13 – The archaeological site of Antigonea.

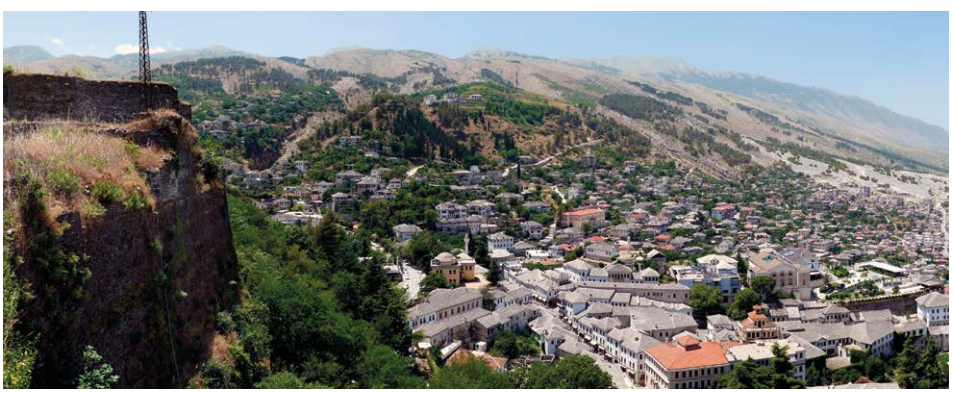


Figure 1.14 – View of Gjirokastër from the Castle.

[9] See footnote 3 § 2.1.

A third factor that has contributed significantly to the current configuration of the Përmet region is the extreme discontinuity of the forms of political-military, socio-economic and spatial organisation that have accompanied its evolution until relatively recently. The succession of dominations, conflicts, and re-foundations is reflected in the stratification of heritage elements and in the selection that has occurred over time, or due to violence, of signs emerging from the land palimpsest. This condition is typical of the Balkan regions and affected here both by its geographic location as a 'frontier' and the events that, since its proclamation in 1912, marked the first century of life of the Albanian nation.

Among the oldest layers, in addition to the aforementioned sites and archaeological findings, it is worth mentioning the remains of a city wall belonging to a military lookout on the Vjosa Valley dating back to the 4th-6th century on top of *Guri i Qytetit* (the City Stone), the large sandstone rock that dominates the town centre of Përmet. [Fig. 1.15]

Figure 1.15 – The *Guri i Qytetit* (City Stone) in Përmet.

The presence of early medieval settlements on the uplands on the two sides of the Vjosa was documented by an excavation campaign conducted in 2011.[10] The later phase (12th-13th centuries) is instead evidenced by the Byzantine architecture preserved in the area: the expansion of the Kelcyra Fort, the first core of the Tepelenë Castle and, above all, the Church of the Prophet Elijah (*Profetit Ilia*), in the village of Bual (on the right bank) and the Church of Dormition of St. Mary (Fjetja e Shën Mërisë), in the village of Kosinë (on the left bank). The latter was recognised as a Category I Cultural Monument in 1963. [Fig. 1.16]

[10] See < https://memolaproject.eu/vjosa/archaeology > (2024-01-27).

Figure 1.16 – The Church of the Dormition of St Mary in Kosinë.

Although it developed from pre-existing nuclei, the historical settlement in the area of Përmet that has come down to us belongs, together with its infrastructural framework, to the Ottoman Empire (14th-19th century).[11]

> According to Zindel *et al.* (2018), the first attempts by the Ottomans to apply the *Timar* date back to the sultanate of Bayezid I (1389-1402). This was a system of granting occupied lands in use between the 14th and 16th centuries, according to which the beneficiary (Timariot) – military, civil or religious – obtained from the Sultan the right of usufruct through the imposition of tithes. «In the eastern areas of Korça and Përmet - wrote Zindel *et al.* (2018: 59) - [the Ottomans] installed a Kadi (head of the civil administration) and a Subhasis (military commander). In 1417 the important towns of Berat, Gjirokastër and Vlorë in the south also came under their control and in the same year the Sandshak (Province) of Arvanit-ili was established with Gjirokastër as its centre.»[12]

Although the earliest historiographical sources mentioning the name of Përmet and some of the inland villages are tax registers dating to the 15th century, the surviving artefacts date mainly from the last phase of the empire. These include a number of 17th-19th century post-Byzantine churches, among which the Church of St. Nicholas (Shën Koll) in Përmet [Fig. 1.17] and the Church of the Dormition of St. Mary (Fjetja e Shën Mërisë) near the village of Leusë are particularly important. [Fig. 1.18]

[11] The infrastructural development of the territory of present-day Albania by the Turkish rulers went hand in hand with Islamisation and the consequent transformation of the country's historical and religious heritage. Islamisation lay at the origin of the first emigrations of Orthodox Christian Albanians to southern Italy, the ancestors of the *Arbëreshë* minorities still living in Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Molise, Apulia and Sicily.

[12] Authors' translation from German.

Figure 1.17 – The Church of St Nicholas in Përmet.

Figure 1.18 – The Church of the Dormition of St Mary in Leusë.

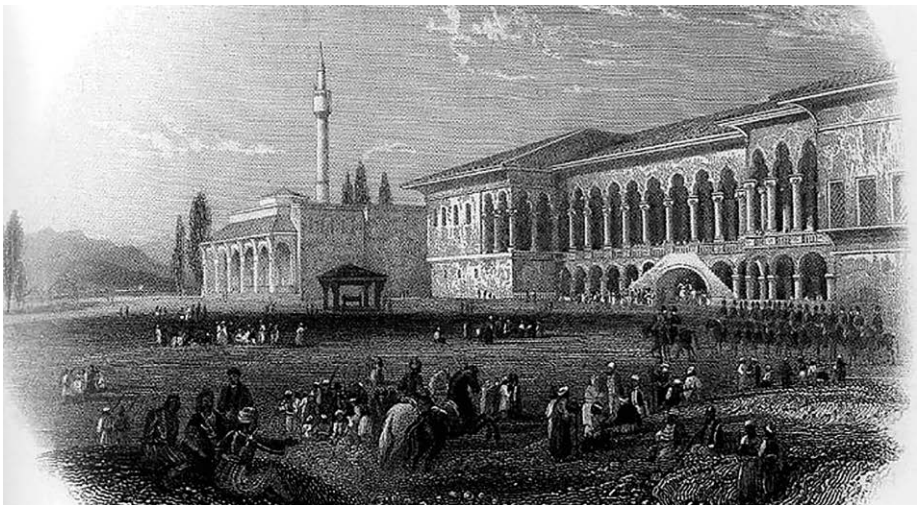


Figure 1.19 – The palace-fortress of Ali Pasha in Tepelenë (engraving by Edward Finden, based on drawings by William Purser, early 19th century).

Figure 1.20 – The remains of the fortress and the suspension bridge at Tepelenë.

Figure 1.21 – The Kadiu Bridge.

During Turkish rule, for around half a century the area was part of the autonomous Ioannina Eyale (1787-1822), under whose despot Ali Pasha some of its most significant constructions were built: the fortress of Tepelenë, Ali's birth town, erected by incorporating the remains of the Byzantine castle; [Fig. 1.19] the rebuilding of the Vjosa crossing, already present in Roman times, as a suspension bridge, between Tepelenë and the village of Beçisht; [Fig. 1.20] the Kadiu Bridge (*Ura e Kadiut*) at the mouth of the Lëngarica Canyon on the route connecting the mountain villages of Bënjë and Delvinë in Shqeri. [Fig. 1.21] The latter, as Saliu (2011) reports, was part of a system of 17 bridges built by the Ottomans in the Përmet area, most of which were destroyed.

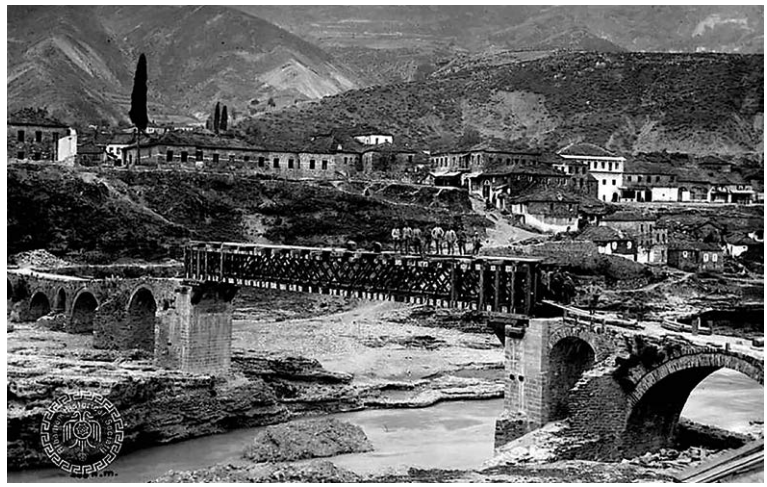


Figure 1.22 – View of Përmet on the eve of the First World War.

Figure 1.23 – A street in Përmet (1916-18).

In the same period, marked by intense relations with the West, Lord Byron stayed in Tepelenë as the guest of Ali Pasha, and François Pouqueville was assigned Consul General to Napoleon Bonaparte at Ioannina. In one of his reports Pouqueville described Përmet as a flourishing urban centre with workshops and a large market, inhabited by around 700 families, of which «two-thirds are Turks, one-sixth are Christians, and the remaining sixth gypsies» (Pouqueville, 1820: 56). The city was dominated at the time by a «handsome new palace of Ali of Janina, erected within a fortress, commanding the passage of the Aous» (*ibid.*), which was razed to the ground after the fall of the pasha. In 1905, in *The Burden of the Balkans*, the English ethnologist Edith Durham reported that there were «7,000 inhabitants, three mosques, three churches, a Christian girls' and boys' school, and a Moslem boys' school» and how, from the ruins of the palace of Ali Pasha,, «Përmeti, with its tall cypresses, purple Judas-trees, and delicate spring greenery, seemed one of the fair spots of the world» (Durham, 1905: 269).

A few years later, the idyllic landscape admired by Durham [Figs. 1.22-1.23] was heavily mutilated as part of the upheavals triggered by the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

Immediately after the Declaration of the Independence of Albania (*Shpallja e Pavarësisë së Shqipërisë*) from the Ottoman Empire (28 November 1912), during the clashes between the local population and the Greek army for control of the border (1913-14), the territory of Përmet was the scene of massacres and repeatedly subjected to looting. Thereafter, between

Figure 1.24 – The *bazaar* in Përmet, destroyed by bombing (1944).

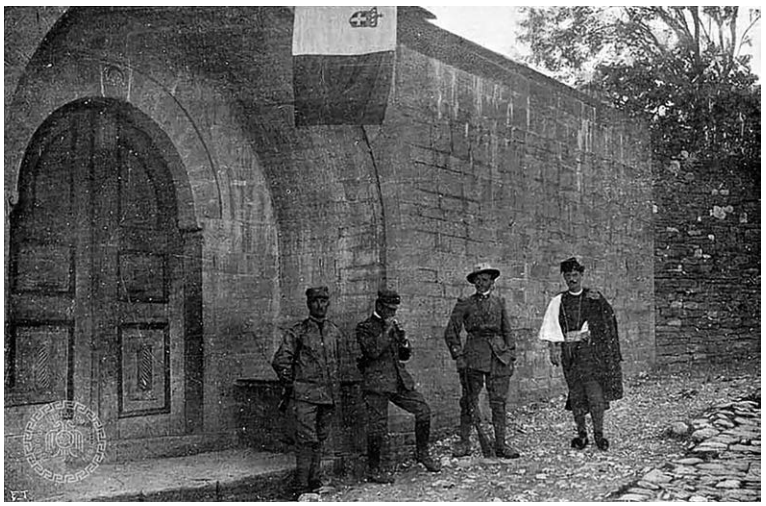


Figure 1.25 – Italian soldiers in Përmet (1916-18).

1940 and 1942, at the height of the Second World War, the city suffered four fires that affected around 80% of its built heritage, leading to the obliteration of much of its Ottoman centre and the definitive disappearance of the *bazaar* (Adhami, 2001b). [Fig. 1.24] Similar devastation also occurred in the inland villages, such as Leusë and Bënjë (Saliu, 2011).

In the meantime, from the start of the First World War to the end of the Second, first the south of Albania, following an occupation campaign and the establishment of a protectorate (1915-20), [Fig. 1.25] and then the entire nation, following an invasion and annexation to the fascist state (1939-43), came under the power of the Kingdom of Italy.

During this time, Albania also became a "conquest territory" for Italian architects and engineers involved in projects concerning infrastructure, public buildings and new arrangements in city centres (Pashako 2012). Projects from this period include a steel bridge with a lattice structure over the Vjosa – the *Ura Metalike e Dragotit* (Dragoti Bridge) – near Tepelenë. [Fig. 1.26] The bridge, included among the Category II Cultural Monuments, was built in 1936 by the company Ansaldo; it is now part of the SH75 National Road.

With the establishment in 1940 of the Central Office for Construction and Urban Planning for Albania (*Zyra Qendrore e Edilicjes dhe Urbanistikës*) at the Ministry of Public Works (*Ministria e Punëve Botore*) in Tiranë, a task force of urban planners was instructed to draw up City Master Plans, implementation regulations and urban projects for the redevelopment and modernisation of Albanian cities in cooperation with local offices. Although only some of the works were later actually implemented (Giusti, 2006), they continued to exert a strong influence on the development of Albanian cities for a long time. In addition to the capital Tiranë (Tirana) and the main port cities – Vlorë (Valona), Durrës (Durrës), Sarandë (Port Edda), Shëngjin (San Giovanni di Medua), now part of the Municipality of Lezhë – the planning activities of the Office, which continued to function for some years even after the fall of Fascism as the Architecture and Town Planning Directorate (*Drejtoria e Arkitekturës dhe Urbanistikës*) of the same

Figure 1.26 – The Dragoti Bridge over the Vjosa River.

Figure 1.27 – The ruins of the Italian barracks of the 'Perugia' division.

Ministry, concerned "the City Master Plans of some agricultural centres in the centre-west: Elbasan and Berat, the organisation of the central area of the cities of Shkodra and Coritza (Korça) and finally the City Master Plan of some small centres of strategic importance such as Milot and Përmet" (Pashako, 2012: 65-66).

After the end of the occupation – of which the ruins of the barracks of the "Perugia" division of the 11th Battalion of the Royal Italian Army are still a testimony today at the junction of the road to Leusë [Fig. 1.27] – Përmet hosted the First Antifascist Congress of the Albanian National Liberation Movement (known as the "Congress of Përmet") in 1944, from which the provisional government emerged, paving the way for

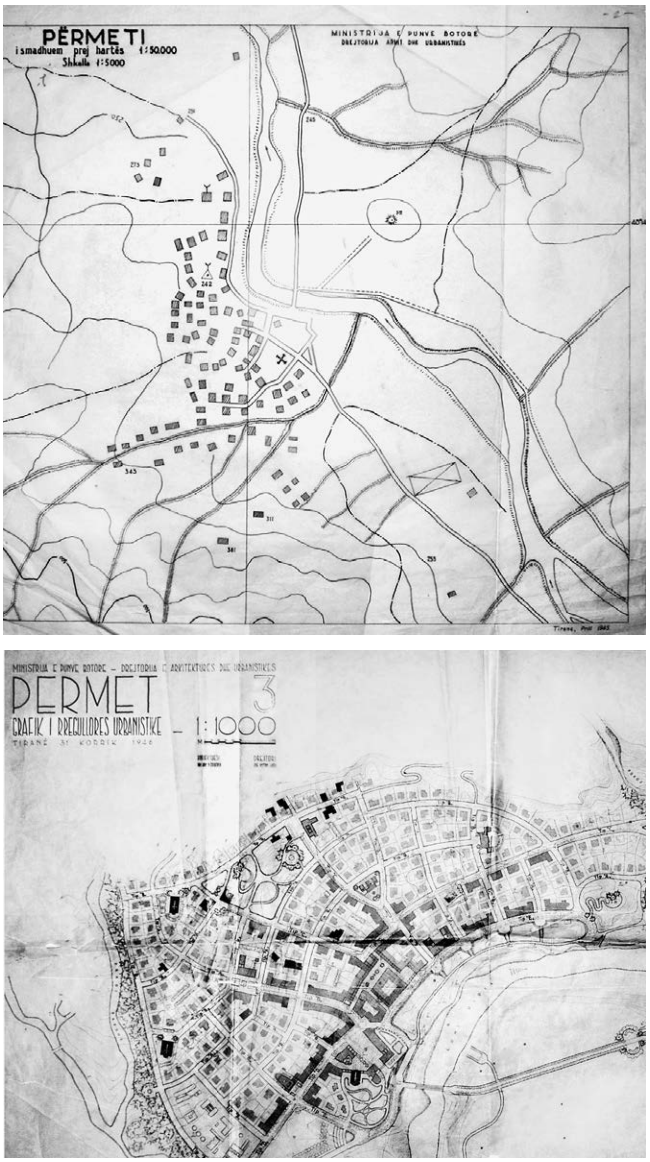


Figure 1.28 – The Përmet Town Master Plan of 1946.

the establishment of Enver Hoxha's regime: a role that would secure the city a favourable place in the economic planning of the communist state.

In 1946, the plan prepared by the Architecture and Town Planning Directorate, conceived by the architect Domenico Casasola, redesigned the city with the creation of a new road network and the reorganisation of the central area around a large square (Menghini *et al.*, 2012). [Fig. 1.28]

This plan, which was only partially implemented at the time, was the reference for both the town centre development project approved by the government in 1963 as part of a five-year programme of cultural and social development for Përmet, and the urban development induced by demographic and economic growth in the years immediately thereafter. Under the direction of the State Construction Company (*Ndërrmarja Shtetërore e Ndërtimit*), established in 1969, new residential blocks and production facilities were built, and social, administrative and cultural services – including the cinema – were set up.[13] [Fig. 1.29]

By the early 1980s, the old town planning instrument was insufficient to govern the expansion drive and was replaced by a new City Master Plan, approved in 1983 [Fig. 1.30] which was implemented up until the fall of the regime and into the first years of the parliamentary republic. This plan was responsible for the construction of two residential blocks, the industrial area to the east, which became home to several food processing companies, and the scenic reconfiguration of the entrance to the city from the SH75 road. The construction of an iconic building – the "Kupola" – on the right bank of the Vjosa, at the perspective convergence point of the three main urban thoroughfares dates back to this period. Inspired by Russian constructivist architecture, it was designed by engineer Ibrahim Emiri and used as a reception venue by the communist nomenklatura. After the fall of the regime the building was first looted and vandalised, and finally demolished in 2022 to make way for a new hospitality structure.[14] [Fig. 1.31]

[13] The cinema in Përmet was opened in the 1970s. After a long period of neglect, it was recently refurbished into a multifunctional centre thanks to funding from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS).

[14] See < https://alb-spirit.com/2020/05/23/ibrahim-emiri-bar-restorant-kupola-ne-permet-dhe-mundesia-e-rijetezimit> (2024-01-27).

Figure 1.29 – The recently renovated cinema in Përmet.

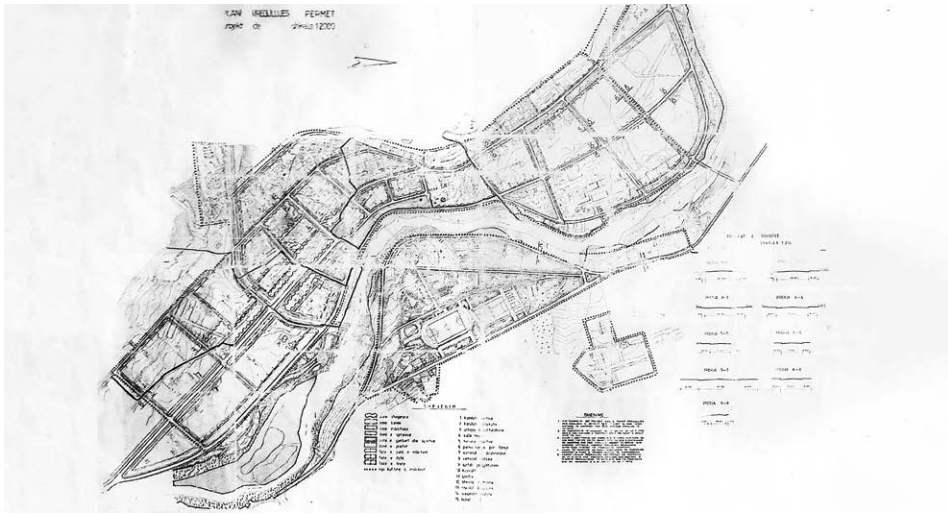


Figure 1.30 – The Përmet Town Master Plan of 1983.

Figure 1.31 – The 'Kupola', a bar-restaurant on the banks of the Vjosa demolished in 2022.

The transformations of the second half of the 20th century resulted in the loss of some heritage elements that had survived the devastation of war, in the intense alteration suffered by the *ShënKoll* Church (partially demolished during the atheisation campaign conducted by the Enverist regime and later rebuilt), and in the demolition of remaining parts of the Ottoman walls to accommodate the residential expansion planned in the 1980s. On the other hand, they led to the creation of new places used intensely by the population, consisting of the system formed by the central square, dedicated to the hero of Albanian independence Abdyl Frashëri, and the urban park on the Vjosa, incorporating the abandoned spaces of the old market. [Figs. 1.32-1.33]

Figure 1.32 – The centre of Përmet on a postcard from the late 1960s.

Figure 1.33 – Përmet in the early 1980s.

In the rest of the municipality, building development, which was limited until the start of the new century, was concentrated around the settlements at the bottom of the valley and in the villages that were easier to access from the road network. In the innermost parts, the villages have maintained their post-World War II layout, suffering from the abandonment caused by mass emigration which affected the whole country after the civil war of 1997-98, but was particularly intense in this area, as we have seen.

1.1.3 Spatial and Strategic Planning in Albania

In the transition from a communist state to a parliamentary republic, sanctioned by the 1998 Constitution, land management proved to be one of the most complex testing grounds on which to measure the new Albania's ability to renew its regulatory, policy, management and control instruments in a radically changed legal, social and economic context.

The crisis inherited from the communist period not only affected the industrial system, but also heavily involved the agricultural and housing sectors, with a housing deficit that has accumulated over the years, despite state intervention, which from the late 1980s placed Albania among the countries that suffered the most in Europe in this respect, even compared to the other Eastern bloc states (Aliaj *et al.*, 2010). Over the next decade, economic and social depression led to a new phase of the "Albanian diaspora" (King & Vullnetari, 2003; Barjaba 2019), which has so far seen around 1.6 million people (out of a total population of around 2.8 million residents[15]) leave the country, mainly for Italy and Greece (Doka & Qiriazi, 2022).

> From the end of the 1990s until today, the phenomenon has become increasingly complex due to multiple factors: the Kosovo war, which in 1999, for the first time, saw Albania become a host country for massive inflows (500.000 Kosovo refugees in one year alone); the return home, from 2009 onwards, of significant numbers of first-generation Albanian emigrants, following the economic and financial crisis that hit the two main destination countries hard: Italy and, above all, Greece; the increase in highly educated migrants seeking better qualification and career opportunities; as well as, consequently, the intercontinental diversification of destination countries (USA and Canada in particular) (Göler & Doka, 2015; World Bank, 2016; Doka & Qiriazi, 2022).

In addition to external migration, there was also strong internal migration towards the main urban centres, in particular Tiranë, which has further aggravated the depopulation conditions in rural areas.

In 1993, an urban planning legislation reform revised and supplemented the rationalist city master plans of the communist period in light of the reintroduction of private ownership, which had been abolished thirty years earlier (Aliaj *et al.*, 2014), alongside new instruments such as master plans and urban studies for specific areas (Shutina *et al.*, 2021). However, the new regulatory system was inadequate both to meet the population's most urgent needs and to govern the transformations, which were as explosive as they were chaotic (Aliaj *et al.,* 2010), brought about by the transition to a market economy and the privatisation of hitherto state-controlled economic sectors. The situation was made more complicated by the matter of the restitution and compensation of real estate that was expropriated or confiscated during communism and the lack of clarity in title deeds, which represented an obstacle to both proper urban planning and the orderly development of the real estate market.

> As noted by Aliaj *et al.* (2010: 105) «It seems that extra-legal interests in alliance with certain political segments, aimed to keep urban planning and management under their own control […]. With the desire of these segments to maintain control of sectors of the economy and assets, and with the still-lingering question of property restitution under the new system of ownership, efforts toward total transparency in such matters have stagnated and corruption has continued.» In this opaque environment, the property sector becomes a privileged field for laundering money from illegal activities, with further distorting effects (Ibraj, 2018).

[15] See <https://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/demography-and-social-indicators/population/publication/2022/population-of-albania-1-january-2022/ > (2024-01-27).

The weakness of the rule of law, together with the lack of effective housing policies and of a regulatory system capable of mediating between private and collective interests, negatively reflect on the development of settlements and impoverish the territorial heritage due to three concomitant phenomena:

- Uncontrolled speculative urbanisation in the major cities, which have very high building indexes (with plot coverage ratios approaching 90% (Shutina *et al.*, 2021) and no public compensation to be paid by investors;
- The prevalence of illegal settlements, mainly consisting of residential buildings of 1-2 storeys[16] (Aliaj *et al.*, 2010); it has been estimated that from 1995 to 2016 approximately 400,000 illegal buildings were built in Albania, compared to 42,647 regular buildings officially recorded (Shutina *et al.*, 2017);
- The abandonment and degradation of villages and infrastructure systems in rural areas.

In parallel with the process of Albania's accession to the EU, which began in 2006, a different approach to urban and territorial development aimed at overcoming these critical issues began to take shape through a series of reforms concerning both land management and the reorganisation of administrative levels in a logic of simplification and greater affordance of tools and procedures. The main objective was still economic development, in respect of which the public role in the administrative management of processes is twofold: (1) reducing bureaucracy costs, and (2) maximising the positive effects of transformation on the community. In this perspective, an important role is assigned to urban regeneration programmes, to be fostered through more effective planning tools and more efficient territorial institutions. An initial step in this direction is the approval of Law No. 10119/2009 "On Spatial Planning" (*Për Planifikimin e Territorit*), which sanctions the overcoming of rationalist planning in favour of integrated spatial planning inspired by the principles of sustainability, transparency and legality (Qorri, 2021).

In 2014, the year in which Albania's candidature to join the EU was officially formalised, two laws redefined the reference framework for territorial development, in what was seen as an attempt to move closer to European models (Allkja, 2018) by introducing "local democracy processes into a still centralised form of State" (De Luca & Di Figlia, 2021: 140):

- Law No. 107/2014 "On territorial planning and development" *(Ligj Për Planifikimin dhe Zhvillimin e Territorit)* amending Law 10119 by introducing a strategic instrument at state level, the General National Spatial Plan - GNP *(Plani i Përgjithshëm Kombëtar* - PPK), drawn up in agreement between the National Territorial Planning Agency - NTPA (*Agjencia Kombëtare e Planifikimit të Territorit* - AKPT), established by the same law, and the Ministry of Urban Development - MoUD *(Ministria e Zhvillimit Urban* - MZHU). The GNP is supported by two Integrated Cross-sectoral Plans (*Plani i Integruar Ndërsektorial* - PINS) covering the coastal strip and the Tiranë Durrës economic zone, respectively;
- Law No. 115/2014 reforming local authorities, which incorporates the previous 373 communes into 61 municipalities *(Bashkie)*, forming 12 counties *(Qarqe)* within three regions: northern, central and southern;[17] the same law also establishes the General Local Territorial Plans - GLTP *(Plane të Përgjithshme Vendore* - PPV), under the jurisdiction of the municipalities, subordinated to the GNP.

[16] In Albania, this phenomenon is called 'Bathorisation', named after the first fully squatted neighbourhood - Bathore - built on the northern outskirts of Tiranë (Aliaj *et al.*, 2010).

[17] Although provided for in legislation, the regional level has not yet been clearly defined in terms of its administrative role and, consequently, its role in the planning process.

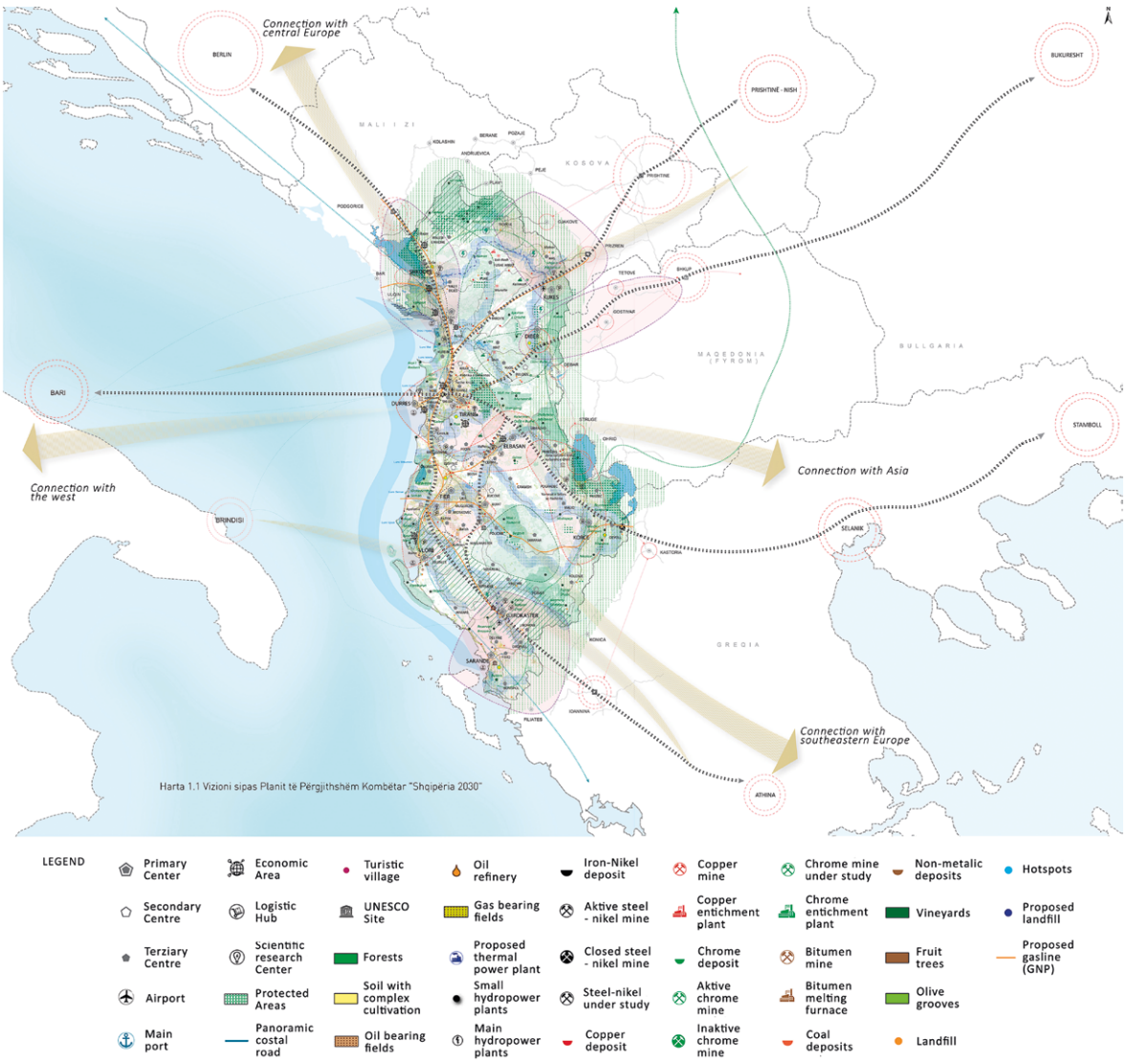


Figure 1.34 – General National Spatial Plan "Albania 2030." Strategic vision.

1.1.3.1 The "Albania 2030" National Plan

The General National Spatial Plan (GNP) "Albania 2030" (*PPK "Shqiperia 2030"*)[18] [Fig. 1.34] approved by the Council of Ministers on 14 December 2016 sets out, within a 15-year period, the strategic directives to be followed by local authorities in order to realign spatial planning with socio-economic dynamics, correcting current distortions regarding land use.

The plan defines five national territorial systems (*Kombëtare territorial system*) providing a list of strategic projects/guidelines for each of them:

- Urban System: development of a polycentric system and enhancement of services and quality of life in urban areas;

[18] See < https://planifikimi.gov.al/index.php?id=ppk_shqiperia > (2024-01-27).

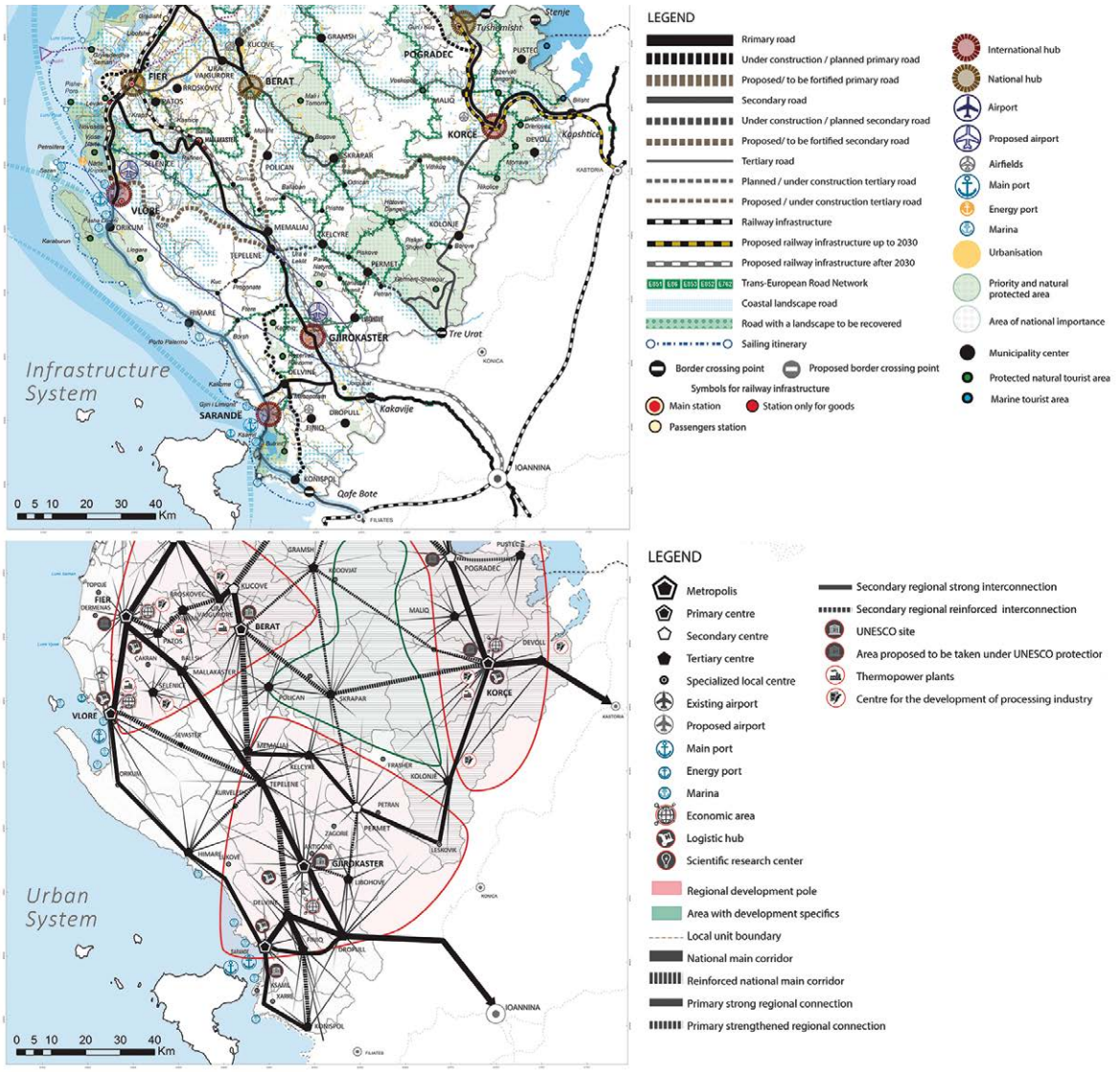
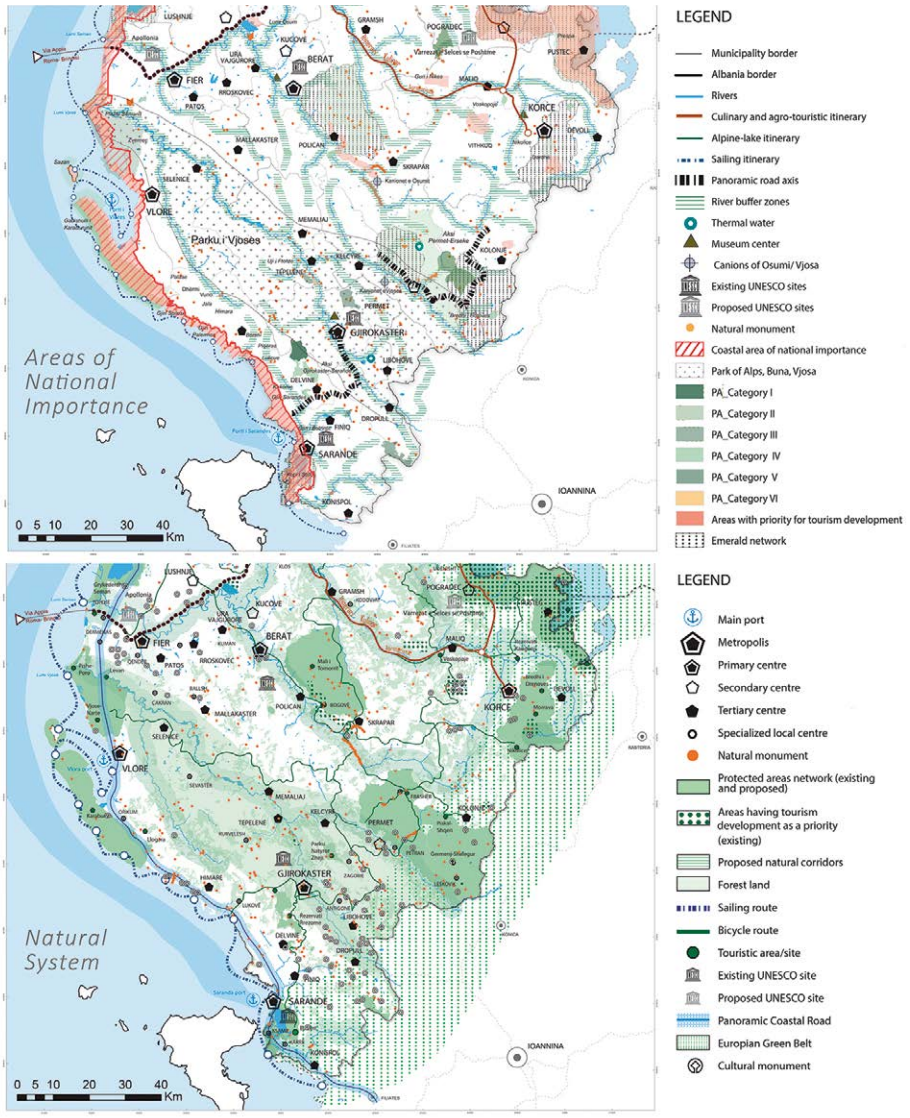


Figure 1.35 – General National Spatial Plan "Albania 2030." Extracts related to the Southern Region of Albania from the thematic maps of Urban, Infrastructure, Natural Systems and Areas of National Importance.

- Water System: consolidation of the infrastructure networks (drinking water, water supply and sewage system); development of a project to protect the country's water resources and the blue-green corridor (identified as the "blue line") including the coastal strip and the mouths of the main watercourses;
- Agricultural System: creation of production-harvesting-processing-export chains and related infrastructure; investments in technology to modernise production; investments in maintenance infrastructure, irrigation canals, reservoirs and transport infrastructure;
- Natural System: creation of a national cycle network to reach and cross natural areas with high landscape and cultural-historical value; launch of the Bunë River Park project; establishment of the Alpine Park; launch of the Vjosa River Park project;
- Infrastructure System: construction of 2 new airports by 2030 in the northern region (at Kukes) and the southern region (near Vlorë).



Seven Regional Development Poles (*Poli i zhvillimit rajonal*)[19] and four Specific Development Areas (*Zona me specifikë zhvillimi*) are also identified.[20] [Fig. 1.35]

The former are sub-regional areas revolving around one or more urban centres considered in organic relation to the reference territories, which the GNP recognises as of priority interest for the development of a national polycentric system, defining the strategies to be pursued in the General Local Territorial Plans.

The latter are areas with distinct territorial features linked to their geographical position, i.e. the presence of natural, historical-cultural or economic resources, which make them of particular economic, tourist and social interest. These specific vocations should

[19] The poles cover the following sub-regional areas: (1) Kukës - Has - Tropojë; (2) Korçë - Pogradec; (3) Elbasan; (4) Tiranë - Durrës; (5) Shkodër - Lezhë; (6) Vlorë - Fier - Berat; (7) Gjirokastër - Saranda.

[20] The areas are the following: (1) Dibër-Mat-Klos-Bulqizë; (2) Malësi e Madhe-Tropojë; (3) Pukë-Mirditë-Fushë Arrëz; (4) Skrapar-Përmet-Këlcyrë.

not be considered as exclusive, but as assets that can also emphasise the other resources and activities in the area.

1.1.3.2 The General Local Territorial Plans

The General Local Territorial Plans (GLTPs) introduced by Law No. 115/2014 are subsidised by the State and drawn up following public tenders. They are multidimensional and complex in that they are made up of three closely interrelated components: (1) strategic, derived from the General National Spatial Plan and developed to urban scale; (2) regulatory, typical of urban plans, concerning the regulation of land use; (3) operational, relating to the economic feasibility of the proposed transformations (De Luca & Di Figlia, 2021).

The GLTP consists of textual and cartographic documents including:

- The Analysis and evaluation of the factual state *(Analiza dhe Vlërsimi)* in which the critical issues and strengths of the area are described and mapped;
- The Territorial Strategy *(Strategjia territorialë)*, which contains the lines of action for each of the five systems identified by the GNP (urban, water, agricultural, natural and infrastructural), with which the intention is to overcome the critical issues and enhance the territory's potential in coherence with the overarching strategies;
- The Development Plan *(Plani i Zhvillimit)*, consisting of four thematic tables and the Plan Document, which sets out their contents;
- The Discipline *(Rregullorja)*, regulating land use and detailed planning;
- Strategic Environmental Assessment, to ensure the sustainability of the interventions.

In turn, the Development Plan consists of the following documents: (1) the Land Use Plan *(Plani i propozimeve territorial)* which defines the land use, the protected areas or areas to be protected,[21] the services, the planned transformations, etc.; (2) the Plan of public services and infrastructures *(Plani i shërbimeve dhe infrastrukturave publike)*, defined in response to the functional and/or social critical issues identified in the initial assessment; (3) the Environmental Protection Plan *(Plani i mbrojtjes së mjedisi)*, which sets out the areas subject to protection; (4) the Plan of Actions for the Implementation of the GLTP Strategies *(Plani i vëprimeve per zbatimin e strategjisë dhe PPV-së)*, which indicates the steps to implement the plan within the defined timeframe and with the desired quality. This document links proposals to financial capacities and sources of funding and provides the municipality with the tools to monitor their implementation.

For areas with a higher transformation intensity, the GLTPs may require the drafting of a Local Detailed Plan - LDP (*Plane të Detajuar Vendore*), prior to the issuing of building permits (Toto *et al.*, 2015). This implementation tool allows public administrations to negotiate with operators on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the project (building indices, characteristics of the road network and public space, community amenities and services, etc.) in order to achieve the best balance between public and private interests (Toto & Allkja, 2018; Shutina *et al.*, 2021).

Following the approval of the "Albania 2030" GNP, 55 of the 61 municipalities redesigned by Law No. 115/2014 (including Përmet) have already completed the process for the approval of their GLTPs, five are in the process of preparing it, while one is in the process of starting.[22]

[21] For the preservation and enhancement of the cultural heritage, the references for preparation of the Local General Plans are once again Law 107/2014 (Articles 7 and 9) and the more recent VKM 686/2017 on the approval of the Spatial Planning Regulation (*Për miratimin e Rregullores së Planifikimit të Territorit*), Articles 30-31, according to which the areas and assets of national importance are defined.

[22] Situation on 2024-09-01. For updates see < https://planifikimi.gov.al/index.php?id=43 >.

1.1.4 Plans and projects for the Përmet area

Within the framework of the GNP strategies, the municipality of Përmet comes under both the Regional Development Pole Gjirokastër-Sarandë and the Specific Development Area Skrapar-Përmet-Këlcyrë.

The Regional Development Pole Gjirokastër-Sarandë [Fig. 1.36] comprises 9 municipalities belonging to 2 Counties, Gjirokastër and Vlorë, with the respective cities of Gjirokastër and Sarandë serving as the main centres of the Urban System, while the other seven municipalities (of which 4 are in Gjirokastër County – Përmet, Tepelenë, Këlcyrë and Memaliaj – and 3 are in Vlorë County – Himare, Fiqniq, and Konispol) are identified as service centres for the surrounding area. According to the latest census data from 2011, the total population of the Gjirokastër-Sarandë Pole is 99,209 inhabitants, that is 17.9% less than the approximately 121,000 recorded in 2001. Indeed, this is one of the areas of Albania that has suffered the most from mass migration both abroad and to Tiranë and other major cities in the rest of the country. This condition is reflected in the particular impact, among the territorial critical issues mentioned above, of the abandonment and degradation of rural settlement in inland areas. With regard to the 'wild' urbanisation processes, while the impacts of real estate speculation have been concentrated in the suburbs of the two main centres, unauthorised building has been widespread, albeit relatively less invasive than in other parts of Albania, in all the accessible areas of the territory, including some flat areas along the Vjosa, leading to the formation of small, low-density suburbs around the pre-existing settlements.

As regards Përmet, according to the GNP, the regeneration and revitalisation opportunities of the Regional Development Pole are closely linked to its geographical location and the quality of its natural and human landscape, which is rich in historical testimonies and recognised cultural assets. In other words, they are closely linked to the enhancement of its territorial heritage, mainly in terms of tourism development and the strengthening of the agri-food chain.

The strategies identified for the other systems therefore focus predominantly on this potential, including protective actions to preserve the integrity of the key assets:

- Water System – drafting of annual river basin management plans; definition of the

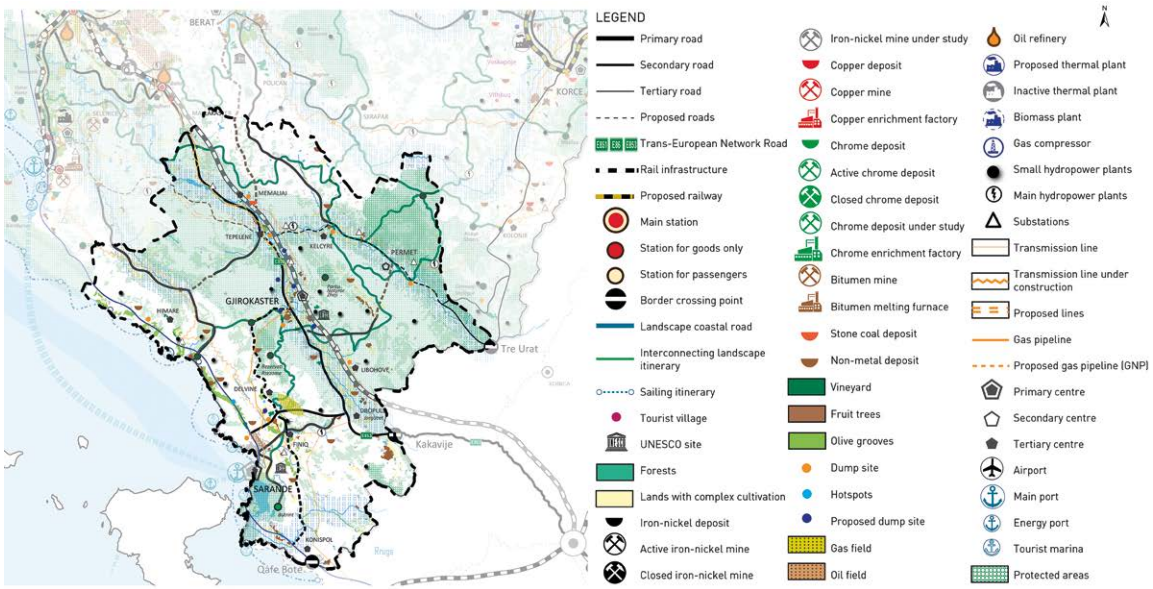


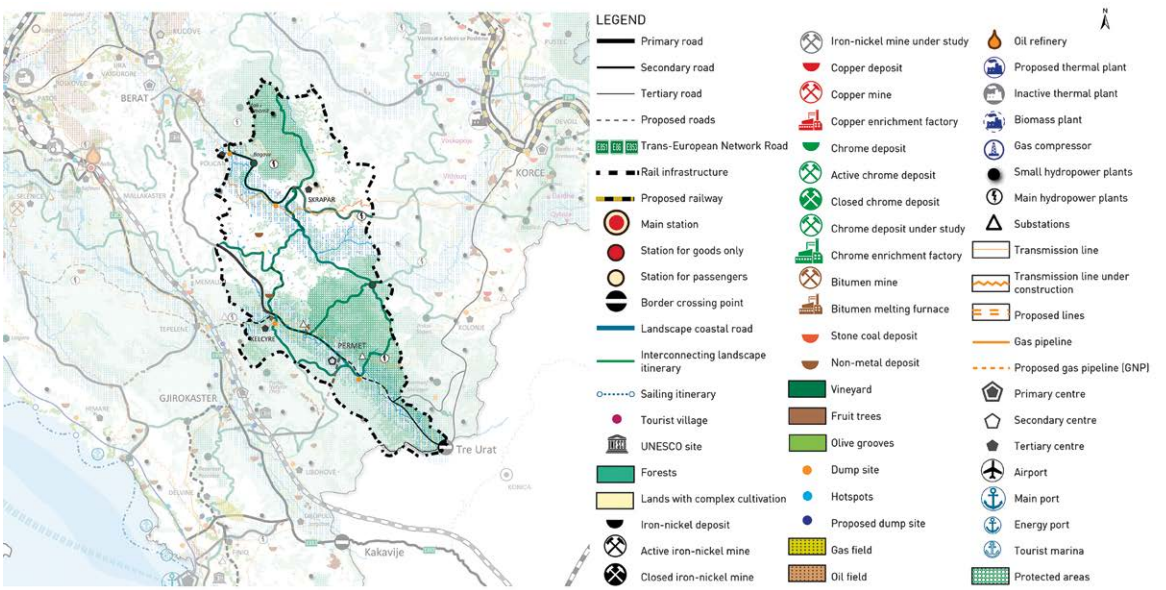
Figure 1.36 – General National Spatial Plan of "Albania 2030." Gjirokastër-Sarandë Regional Development Pole.

"blue line"[23] to demarcate the coastal strip, river mouths and related ecosystems to be subjected to the highest level of protection; zeroing of pollutant spills into the sea and rivers by 2030; construction of purification plants to serve the main centres and tourist areas and completion of water supply and sewerage networks for the same tourist areas and suburban areas still lacking them. Regarding the enhancement of landscape resources: creation of a river-lacustrine route to integrate boating and navigation in a network connecting the Butrint, Viroi, Syr and Kaltër Lakes;

- Agricultural System – creation of a regional agricultural market, to complete the agri-food chain (especially for processing products, such as *glykò* and preserves, typical of the Përmet area);
- Infrastructure System – development of the port and accommodation infrastructure in Sarandë and of the road junctions on the cross-border routes with Greece in both main centres; location within the Pole of one of the two new airports planned in the National Strategy; creation of a transport hub related to agricultural production near Xarra, due to its important role in this sector. As regards the enhancement of historical and environmental resources: creation of a railway near the border with Greece to connect the centres of Tepelenë, Gjirokastër, Dropulli and Kakavija; creation of routes belonging to the national cycle network and soft links between tourist areas, including, in particular, a "blue" itinerary between the seaside resorts of Dhërmi-Himarë-Borsh-Sarandë-Ksamil-Butrint-Konispol and a link between the coastal strip itself and the inland protected area of Kardhiqi. The Infrastructure System also incorporates the strategy aimed at assessing the Pole's natural potential in the production of energy from both renewable sources (wind and especially solar power, considering the favourable exposure, estimated at around 2700 hours/year) and fossil sources (due to the presence of gas and oil deposits in Delvina and Finiq respectively).

Figure 1.37 – General National Spatial Plan of "Albania 2030." Specific Development Area Skrapar-Përmet-Këlcyrë.

In the development perspective outlined for the Regional Development Pole, the Specific Development Area Skrapar-Përmet-Këlcyrë, [Fig. 1.37] in addition to being affected



[23] See § 1.1.3.

by cross-system strategies and being embedded in a territorial network of blue-green infrastructures and slow routes that connect it to the Adriatic coast and other areas of tourist interest, it is a natural candidate to host the regional agricultural market planned within the Pole. This is helped by both its established tradition in agri-food processing and its geographical location, which means synergies can be established in this sector with the nearby Regional Development Pole of Korça. In addition, consideration must be given to the abundance of medicinal and officinal plants that grow, for the most part spontaneously, in its territory, which until now have barely been exploited in economic terms.

The Specific Development Area is also strategic in the diversification of the Pole's tourism offer. It contains heritage elements that are particularly significant for the development of certain forms of tourism, with a view to sustainability. Types of tourism and the corresponding resources explicitly mentioned in the GNP are set out below:

- Cultural tourism: the presence of Category I and II Cultural Monuments, including Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches (Këlcyrë, Leusë, Kosinë,Bual, Bënjë) and Ottoman bridges (Kadiu and Bënjë), as well as historical memories such as the house of the Frashëri brothers, intellectuals and leading figures of the "Albanian Risorgimento" (1840-1912); [Fig. 1.38]
- Balneary tourism – Bënjë thermal baths; [Fig. 1.39]
- Mountainous tourism – network of paths on Mount Tomorr;
- Natural tourism – natural landscapes along the Vjosa and other rivers, including the canyons of Bogova, Skrapar [Fig. 1.40] and Bënjë on Lëngarica; Hotova National Park (habitat of the rare Mediterranean fir);
- Religious tourism – Bektashi pilgrimage route[24] to Mount Tomorr. [Fig. 1.41]

Figure 1.38 – Frashër, Frashëri Brothers' House Museum.

[24] Sufi Islamic brotherhood of Shiite origin, dating from the 13th century. It spread during Ottoman rule in Albania between the 16th and 17th centuries through the Janissaries (the Sultan's private infantry). The Bektashi make up about 2% of the country's population. The headquarters of the Bektashi (*Kryegjyshata*) is in Tiranë. The order moved to Albania in 1929 as a result of the law passed by Atatürk's government in 1925, which banned the practice of Bektashi rites in Turkey.

Figure 1.39 – The Baths of Benje.

Figure 1.40 – The Canyon of the Osum River in the Skrapar municipality.

Figure 1.41 – The *Teqeja* of Kulmaku, the pilgrimage destination of the Bektashi on Mount Tomorr.

1.1.4.1 The General Local Territorial Plan of Përmet

As far as the Municipality of Përmet is concerned, the complete list of Areas of National Importance in the territory (divided into National natural parks, Historical protected areas, Cultural assets and Natural monuments), supplemented by assets considered strategic at local level [see Tab. 1.1], is contained in the accompanying report of the Development Plan, which summarises the operational and regulatory aspects of the GLTP.

Table 1.1 – Strategic territorial resources listed in Përmet's General Local Territorial Plan.

National natural parks (*Parqët natyrore kombëtare*)	Bredhi i Hotovë – Dangëlli National Park (*Parku Kombëtar Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli*)
Historical protected areas (*Zonat e mbrojtura historike*)	Historical centre of Përmet (*Qendër Historike e Qytetit të Përmetit*); Historical centre of Bënjë (*Qendër Historike e Fshatit Bënje*); City Stone Cultural heritage protection area (*Zona mbrojtëse e Pasurisë Kulturore "Guri i Qytetit"*), Përmet; Kadiu Bridge protection area (*Zona e Mbrojtëse e Urës së Kadiut*), Bënjë; Cave dwelling protection area (*Zonë e Mbrojtur e Vendbanimit Shpellor, në Bënjë*), Bënjë; Church of St Mary protection area (*Zonë e Mbrojtur e Kishës së Shën Mërisë, në Bënjë*), Bënje; Grain Mill of Bënjë (*Zonë e Mbrojtur e Mullirit të Drithit, pranë fshatit Bënjë*).
Cultural assets (*Pasuri kulturore*)	Bolenga Castle (*Kalaja e Bolengës*); City Stone (*Guri i Qytetit*), Përmet; Cave of Bënjë (*Shpella e Bënjës*); Kadiu Bridge (*Ura e Kadiut*); Bridge over the Bënje stream (*Ura në Përroin e Bënjës*); Aries Bridge (*Ura e Dashit*) between the village of Bënje and Vinjah; "Çezma e Pacomit" Fountain, Pacomit; Mill on the Lëngarica River (*Mulliri i Drihit Buzë limit të Lengaricës*), Bënje; Church of St Paraskevi (*Kisha e Shën e Premtes*), Përmet; Church of the Dormition of St Mary (*Kisha e Shën Mërisë*), Leusë; Church of St Mary (*Kisha e Shën Mërisë*), Seran; Church of St Mary (*Kisha e Shën Mërisë*), Kosinë; Church of St Sotir in Trimisht (*Kisha e Shën Sotirit në Tremisht*), Petran; Church of St Dëllisë (*Kisha e Shën Dëllisë*), Piskovo; Iconostasis of the Church of St Mary (*Ikonostasi i Kishës së Shën Mërisë*), Bënjë; Iconostasis of the Church of St Mary (*Ikonostasi i Kishës së Shën Mërisë*), Ogdunan; *Teqeja* (Betakshi place of worship), Frashër; House of Lefter Cullufa, Bual; House of the Frashëri Brothers, Frashër; House of Jani Jorgji, Odriçan; House of Konstandine Londos, Odriçan; House of Ylli Imam e Lilo Vangjeli, Përmet; Building where the Congress of Përmet was held, Përmet; Decorative ceiling in the House of Jeko Karafilit, Piskovë.
Natural monuments (*Monumentë natyrore*)	Old Charçova fir (*Bredhi i Çarçovës së Vjetër*); Bokërrimat (stony area/outcrops), Dangllisë; Kokojka fir (*Bredhi i Kokojkës*), Frashër; Petran fir (*Bredhi i Petranit*); Glacial of Nëmërçka (*Cirku i Nemërçkës*); Teqe chestnut (*Gështenja e Teqesë*), Frashër; The pit of Kazanit (*Gropa e Kazanit*); The wooden area of Polmen (*Grumbulli pyjor i Polmenit*); The Atos Stone (*Guri i Atos*), Kutal; The Petran Stone (*Guri i Petranit*), Petran; The City Stone (*Guri i Qytetit*), Përmet; View and olistolites (*Horizonte vithisëse dhe olistolitet*), Charçova; Canyon of Kamenik (*Kanioni i Kamenikut*); Canyon of Lëngarica (*Kanioni i Lengaricës*); Borocka Area – Canyon, The Bee Stone (*Perëndi e Brockës – kanioni, Guri i Bletës*), Xhyrë; Plane tree in Megallara (*Rrapi i Megallarës*); Plane tree of Zhepa (*Rrapi e Zhepës*); Cypresses of the Church of Leusë (*Selvia e Kishës në Leusë*); Nemerchka Well (*Pusi i Nemerçkës*); Gërhot Forest (*Pylli i Gërhotit*); Ropusha Forest (*Pylli i Ropushës*); Pigeons Cave (*Shpella e Pëllumbave*), Bënjë; Thermal waters (*Ujërat termale të Bënjës*), Bënjë; Sopot Waterfall (*Ujëvara e Sopotit*), Stërbec.
Areas of local importance (*Zona më rëndësi lokale*)	SH75 Road, dams, bridges over the Vjosa River; Customs Area (*Area Tre Urat*); Martyrs' Cemetery (*Varrezat e Dëshmorëve*), Përmet; Production, mining and potential development areas for wind and geothermal energy.

The Plan, drafted by the Municipality in accordance with the "Albania 2030" GNP was approved by Council of Ministers Decree *(Vendim të Këshillit të Ministrave)* No. 881/2016. [Fig. 1.42]

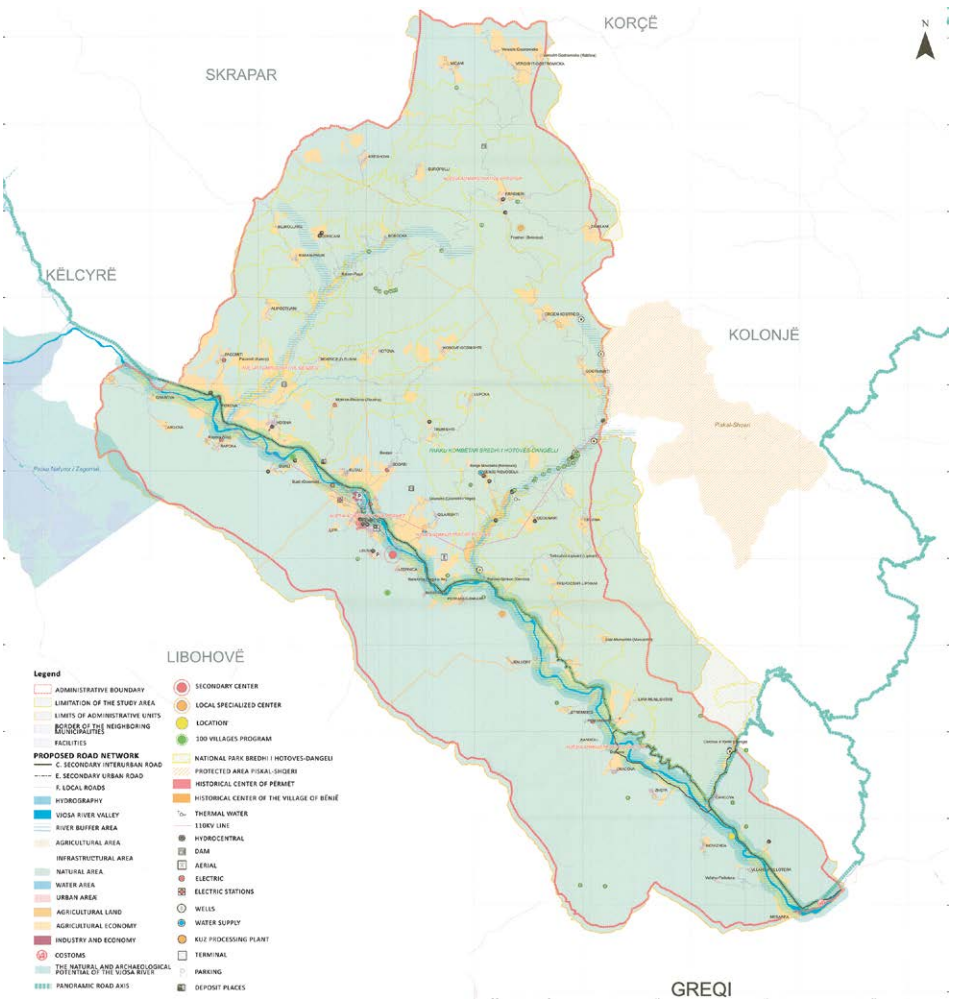


Figure 1.42 – Përmet's General Local Territorial Plan, Development Plan. Strategic Vision Map.

The motto of the GLTP, stated at the beginning of the Territorial Strategy, is the same one that stands at the entrance to the city: "Apart from the sea, we have everything else." It summarises the vision of the future that the Municipal Administration intends to pursue, aimed at developing the area's considerable potential, so that it will once again be the main source of income underpinning the local economy for the next 15 years. [Fig. 1.43]

> «Përmet, a gateway to Albania with an original and unique natural and cultural richness, history and traditions and with a high potential for economic development based on agriculture, livestock breeding and the agri-food business, is turning its economy to rural, natural, health and cultural tourism, based on adequate infrastructure and services, transforming itself into a unique Albanian destination» (Bashkia Përmet, 2020: 19).[25]

[25] Authors' translation from Albanian.

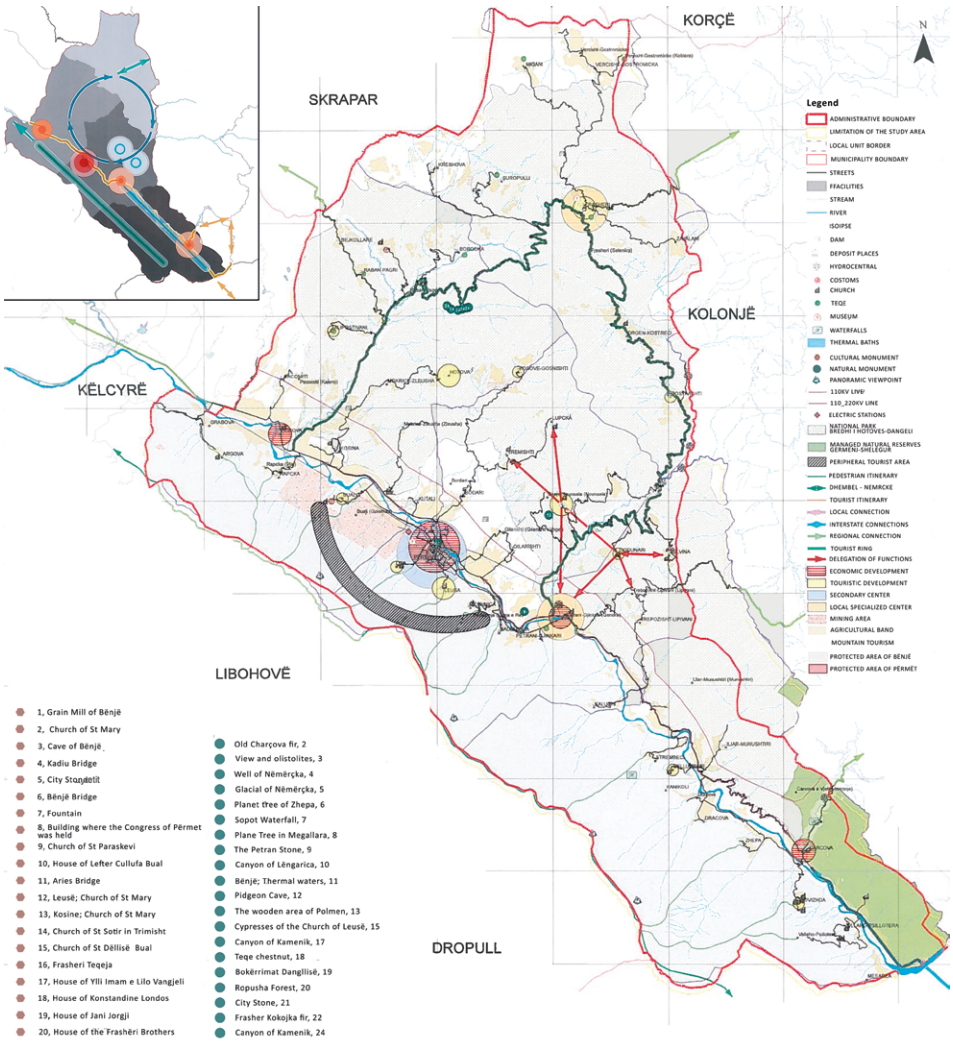


Figure 1.43 – Përmet's General Local Territorial Plan, Territorial Strategy. Vision and development guidelines.

In the GLTP, the strategies pertaining to the five territorial systems are organised through the Plan of Priority Actions, Strategic Investments and Pilot Development Projects (*Plani i veprimeve prioritare, investimeve strategjike/ kapitale dhe projektet pilot*) containing the profiles of the planned interventions with reference to three lines of action or strategic objectives (*objektivë strategjik*):

1. Orientation of the economy towards agriculture, animal husbandry, etc. [*sic*] and tourism;
2. Renovation and enhancement of built-up areas;
3. Infrastructure to serve the population, economic development and conservation of the environment and landscape. [Fig. 1.44]

The projects were chosen in consultation with local stakeholders, organised through public meetings and the distribution of a questionnaire. The consultation also resulted in their division into three phases, corresponding to different priority levels, each lasting five years to cover the entire period of the plan.

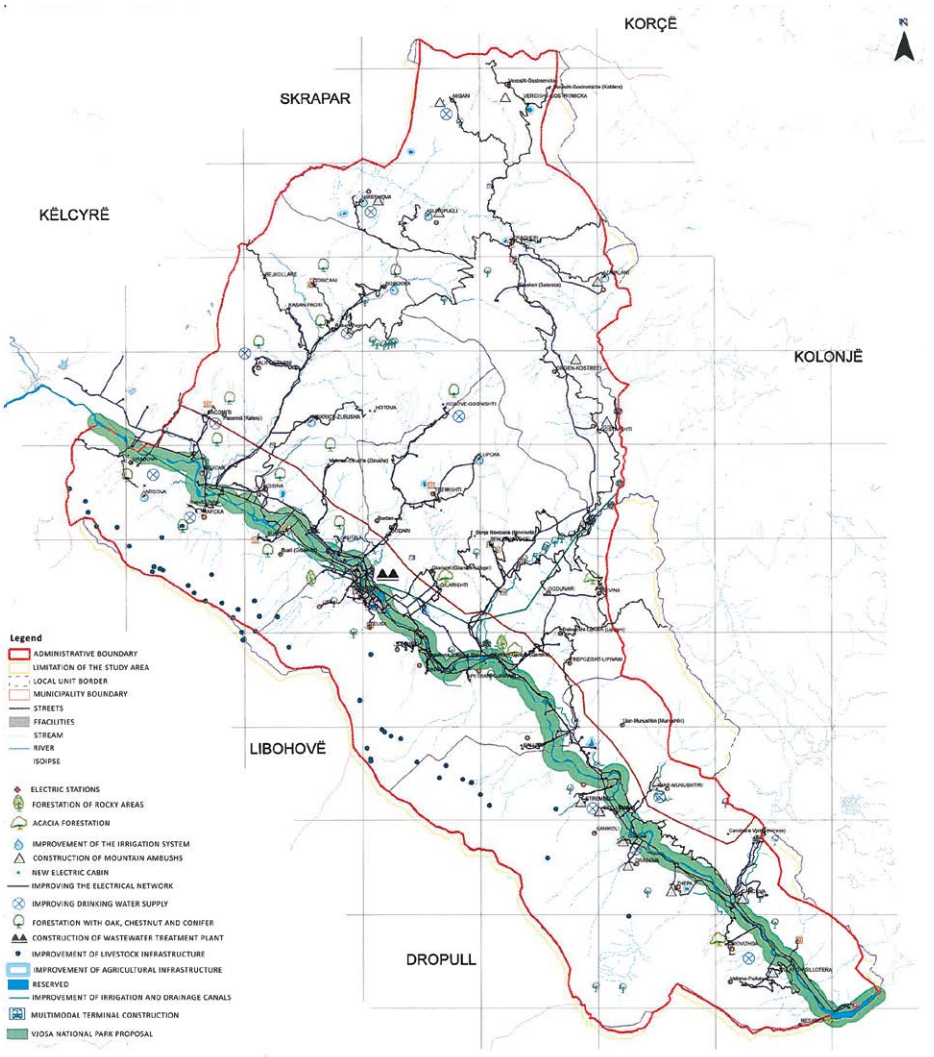


Figure 1.44 – Permet's General Local Territorial Plan, Territorial Strategy. Infrastructure for the population, economic development and preservation of the environment and landscape.

Overall, 87 project profiles were included in the Territorial Strategy.

Four of them respond to the first strategic objective and include: the strengthening of agricultural and livestock facilities, the promotion of local agri-food chains (fruit trees, vines and livestock products), the expansion of sales networks for local specialities and the creation of a local craft market.

Twelve profiles concern actions responding to Strategic Objective No. 2 to improve network works throughout the *Bashkia* territory, the preservation of the historical villages in the hinterland (Bënjë; Lipes, Leusë, Leshnice, Bual; Carçovë) and the Frasheri area; the redevelopment of public spaces and areas in the main villages (Petran, Zhëpe, Kosinë, Piskovë) and in the capital. For the latter, the redevelopment of the entire urban road system and the creation of public pay car parks are also planned, as well as the construction of a new stadium and an unidentified museum in the third phase.

The third line of action involves the most projects: 71. It includes a large-scale road network modernisation programme spread over all three phases, which consists of: the reconstruction of routes to historically important villages that have become al-

most unusable in recent decades (e.g., in phase 1, to Leusë and Bënjë); the construction or renovation of stretches of road to connect inland settlements[26] to each other, to Përmet, or to the SH75;[27] the construction of no less than eight bridges over the Vjosa, two of which provide access to the capital (phase 1) and the others at Kanikol, Çarshovë, Strënbrec, Badëlonjë, Kalaudhi (phases 1-2) and Bual (phase 3). The theme of improving transport also underlies the plans for six intermodal areas to establish a public service between Përmet (main terminal), Piskove, Petran, Carshove, Frashër, and Bënjë thermal baths,[28] as well as the establishment of a school bus service throughout the municipality. Numerous interventions to restore ditches, irrigation canals and small reservoirs for agricultural use, and the construction of internal embankments and rows of trees along the banks of the Vjosa to protect built-up areas, all refer to the same strategic objective. Finally, as regards tourism promotion linked to the conservation and enhancement of the landscape, there are projects to improve accessibility and to build a visitor centre for the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park.

In addition to the descriptions and aims of the projects, the cost estimates and funding sources are set out in the profiles, where available for phase 1 and 2 interventions. These include the municipality, other public bodies, the Albanian Development Fund (*Fondi Shqiptar i Zhvillimit, FZHR*), public-private partnerships or third parties, e.g. from the field of international cooperation.

Although the implementation of the projects was somewhat delayed with respect to the schedule envisaged in the GLTP, by the end of 2023, i.e. halfway through phase 1, a number of major projects were completed or nearing completion, such as the tree planting along the Vjosa, most of the planned urban arrangements in Përmet, and the visitor centre at the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park.

The interventions in the capital, supported by funding from the municipality, the FZHR and foreign donors, involved the renovation of a large part of the road network, with the creation of wide pavements, almost all of which are tree-lined, and new street lighting. Both Freshëri Square and Vjosa Park have been completely redesigned, resulting in a very extensive system of pedestrian spaces of appreciable architectural and landscape quality, which, starting with the central area, overlooked by the municipality building, the main hotels and cafés, runs along two levels parallel to the river up to the City Stone. [Figs. 1.45, 1.46] The system, which includes a viewpoint, promenades and a playground, then branches off through the new pavements into the interior, where the oldest part of the city is located.

The visitor centre of the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park is located close to a site of high scenic value where many of the previously mentioned landmarks are concentrated: the Bënjë thermal baths, the mouth of the Lëngarica Canyon with its prehistoric caves and the Kadiu Bridge. The intervention, financed by the FZHR and the World Bank, consists of a cluster of wooden kiosks containing an information point, a bar, toilets and changing rooms for spa users, whose jagged silhouettes seem to reflect the peaks of the Tomorr and Sërës mountains in the background. The improvement of access roads and the construction of car parks, a camper van park and picnic areas are also part of the project. [Fig. 1.47]

[26] These are the connections for Piskovë-Frashër-Airpostovan and Frashër-Bënje-Ogdounan (phase 1) and Petran - Lipivan - Gjerakarë, Frashër - Zavalan - Kurtës and Gostovisht - Mbreshtan (phase 2).

[27] These are the connections for the settlements of Bodar-Gostinisht, Qilarisht, Lipivan, Lljarë, Strëmbec, Hotovë (phase 2) and Bual (phase 3).

[28] An additional bus stop, for rafters, is planned at a point on the Vjosa to be defined.

Figure 1.45 – Përmet. Freshëri Square after renovation.

Figure 1.46 – Permet. The river park after the regeneration project.

Figure 1.47 – Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park visitor centre. *Above*: photo of the building; *below*: plan.

Not too far away, at 530 m above sea level, lies the village of Bënjë, now in an advanced state of degradation.[29] [Fig. 1.48] Being recognised as a "historical centre", the village is subject to special protection regulations. [Fig. 1.49]

> The "Regulations for the historic centre of Bënjë" (Decree No. 776/2016) divide the village into two zones subject to specific prescriptive measures: the historic centre *(Qëndra Historike)*, where only restoration and conservation work is allowed, with an absolute ban on new construction in both public and private open spaces, and the buffer zone *(Zona e Mbrojtur)* in which limited extensions and new constructions in line with historic building characteristics are permitted: the heights, colours and materials must conform to those of the historic centre.

Bënje is one of the Phase 1 intervention areas for Strategic Objective No. 2 included in the GLTP during the participatory process that accompanied its formation, and it is the subject of a commission from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage for a feasibility study for its renovation.[30] The studies drawn up by the working group of the De-

[29] See Chapter 2.

[30] Bënjë was the subject of part of the research "The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser Known Cultural Site in Albania", carried out in 2020 by a working group from the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence (partly coinciding with the present research). This research defined guidelines for the enhancement of the village with a view to sustainable tourism development. (Laurìa *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 1.48 – A view of the village of Bënjë.

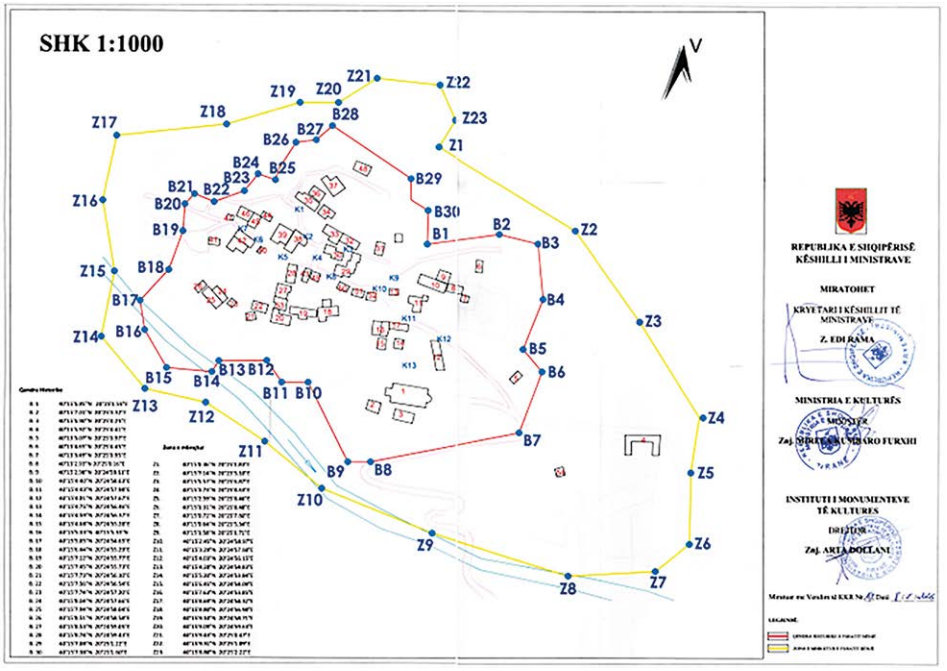


Figure 1.49 – Map of the historical centre of Bënjë (red line) and the buffer zone (yellow line).

partment of Architecture of the University of Florence within the framework of the activities promoted by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation illustrated in the second part of this volume straddle the actions of the GLTP's Territorial Strategy for the thermal area and the village of Bënjë. From a methodological point of view, they propose a project approach aimed at enhancing, through coordinated non-invasive interventions, the material signs and the outcome of memories of the process of co-evolution between man and the environment that has historically shaped this territory, until its almost total abandonment.

While the first results of the GLTP inspired by the "Albania 2030" strategy are beginning to be seen in Përmet, on 15 March 2023, the Council of Ministers approved the decision to establish the Vjosa Wild River National Park,[31] eight months after a commitment to this effect signed by the government with the outdoor clothing company Patagonia, sponsor of the initiative. This milestone was achieved thanks to the great mobilisation of citizens, experts, environmental NGOs and national and international testimonials within the framework of the "Save the blue heart of Europe" campaign,[32] which put an end to the state-proposed plans to exploit the river for the construction of hydroelectric plants, which would have severely distorted the landscape and river ecosystem. At the same time, this decision launched a new phase in the debate on the future of the Përmet area in view of the drafting of the park management plan, which will once again involve local stakeholders and will affect how the GLTP is implemented. Beyond the specific forms and purposes of planning, this is a valuable opportunity to consolidate on a cultural level a development idea that aims to maintain and revitalise the territorial heritage in a lasting and sustainable manner, as a guarantee for generations to come. [Fig. 1.50]

Figure 1.50 – The Vjosa, "the blue hearth of Europe."

[31] VKM 115/2023. The decision provides for the creation of a category II park according to the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) classification. The subject of the Vjosa Park is developed in § 1.2.

[32] See: < https://www.balkanrivers.net/en/vjosanationalparknow> (27/01/2024).

1.2 A river and its landscapes

Gabriele Paolinelli

1.2.1 Naturalness

From Slovenia to northern Greece, the Balkans is the inhabited European region where rivers are more natural than in the rest of Europe[33] and have mostly excellent hydromorphological conditions (Schiemer *et al*., 2020).

This is also the case with the Vjosa, which originated with the name Aoos in the Pindus Mountain Range in northwestern Greece and flows through southwestern Albania, [Figs. 1.51-1.55] and its right-hand tributary Lëngarica, which flows into the Vjosa at Petran in the municipality of Përmet. [Fig. 1.56] The former, 272 km long, has a maximum elevation difference of 2,664 m a.s.l. and is fed by a catchment area extending for 7,240 km^2. The latter, 36.8 km long, has a sub-basin of 374 square kilometres, with an elevation difference between 232 and 2,045 m a.s.l. (Apostolakis & Simixhiu, 2008).

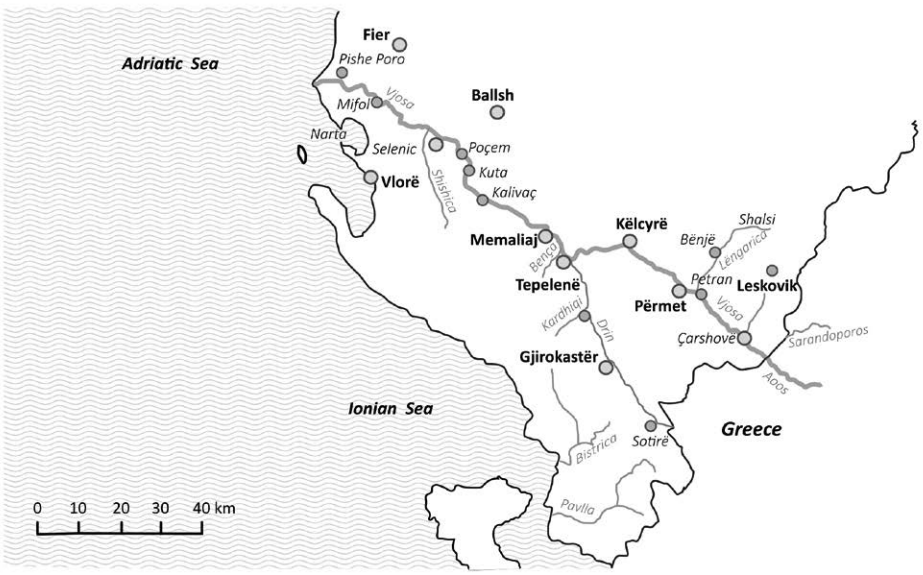


Figure 1.51 – The course of the Vjosa River from source to mouth.

The study area lies within the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park and, more specifically, in the lower valley of the Lëngarica and that of the Bënjë Stream, its right tributary. The landscape has local environmental, social and economic features that depend on the Vjosa River macrosystem and are a significant sample of the richness of the catchment area (see Chapter 2 and § 3.2). For this reason, it is significant to contextualise the project research described in the second part of this volume with respect to the river and its landscapes. This is the case even though it deals specifically with a place in a small village and a minute prefiguration of interventions on a 'minor' resource, a path (see § 3.1).

[33] According to Ecomasterplan Balkan (2018), in the Balkan region a quarter of rivers have hydromorphological conditions classified as "near-natural." In comparison with the rest of Europe, for example, only one tenth of Germany's rivers can boast the same qualities (see Schiemer *et al.,* 2020).

Figure 1.52

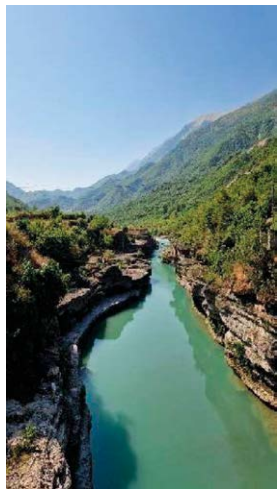


Figure 1.53

Figure 1.54

Figure 1.55

Figure 1.56

Figure 1.52 – The Vjosa River in the Përmet area, with the Nemërçka Mountain Range and the rural villages along the piedmont line between the forests on the steeper slopes and the cultivated fields on the conoids and terraces of the valley floor.

Figure 1.53 – The Vjosa River near Petran, in a section of the riverbed carved into the rock formations of the valley floor.

Figure 1.54 – The landscape of the Vjosa Valley between Petran and Përmet.

Figure 1.55 – The Vjosa River in Përmet.

Figure 1.56 – The Lëngarica Valley in the area of Bënjë.

«The Vjosa River and its tributaries can be classified as a gravel-dominated, laterally active, anabranch rivers with high sediment yields, where the bedload supply is higher than the actual transport capacity of the channel. This is reflected, particularly in the middle section of the river in extensive gravel plains up to 2,000 m wide, crossed by several lateral and parallel rovers, oxbows and side channels. Another criterion of laterally active, anabranch gravel bars are specific forms of break-off at high flow velocities, which is reflected in the rapid abandonment of the main river channel during extreme flood events, and the formation of a new, parallel river channels in former floodplains.» (Sovinc, 2021: 3).

Following the course of the main valley, the entire catchment area can be divided into three sectors: high, medium and low. [Fig. 1.57] With respect to this geographical division, the study area is located in the upper part of the catchment area, including the southern territories of Albania.

«The upper section [...] is characterised by a steeper slope of the watershed and a succession of steep gorges between the settlements Përmet, Këlcyra, and Dragot, interspersed with areas of large alluvial fans and islands. Downstream of the Dragot town area, the river valley widens, with the exception of two gorges in the river course: Kalivaci and Pocemi. The middle section of the river, between the towns Selenice and Tepelena, is a typical river floodplain. The middle section is known for the large gravel and sand banks formed by the branching river. The valley is wide, and the floodplains of Vjosa River are recognised as one of the most magnificent riparian ecosystems of the Balkan Peninsula, characterised by their natural, dynamic hydromorphological processes.
[...]. The lower section is characterised by the widening of the Vjosa River and the formation of wide meanders. Between the towns of Fieri and Vlora, the Vjosa River crosses the Myzeqe lowlands and flows towards the Adriatic Sea. The river delta is located north of the Narta Lagoon, where the river reaches the sea.» (Sovinc, 2021: 4).

Figure 1.57 – The main catchment areas of the Vjosa River basin in Albania. Përmet, Bënjë and the Lëngarica River are located in the upper section circled in red.

The physiographic, hydrogeological and hydrological characteristics of the basin are primary factors in the landscape ecologies of the river and its tributaries. Deep aquifers support the ecological flow of the river even during drought periods. The widespread high nature values found in the catchment ecosystems (Wickel & Galaitsi, 2017) also connote the landscapes aesthetically, giving them significant socioeconomic recreational and tourism potential.

In the Vjosa Basin, more than 15 habitat types of priority conservation interest according to the EU Habitats Directive have been identified. In general, different habitat types make river ecosystems important for the conservation of biodiversity. The most significant and represented situations include: calcareous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation, *Platanus orientalis* and *Liquidambar orientalis* woods, alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* and southern riparian galleries and thickets (*Nerio-Tamaricetea* and *Securinegion tinctoriae*)[34] (Shumka *et al.*, 2018).

1.2.2 Critical issues

A number of studies that have examined the Vjosa River basin have found various critical issues, despite the fact that it is one of the most interesting areas in Europe due to the high degrees of naturalness of its ecosystems.

According to Shumka *et al.* (2018), the main threats to the native riparian vegetation are deforestation, fires, uncontrolled grazing and subsequent erosion. A systematic analysis of the typology of critical issues was conducted in a recent study prior to the formulation of the proposed establishment of the national park in accordance with IUCN categories (Sovinc, 2021). The broadest range of threats is found in the middle and lower basin, which is to be expected. But the study highlights a complexity of factors, [Tab. 1.2] which also present systemic interactions. Among others, there is one aspect of particular biological relevance for the conservation of river ecosystems and therefore of the naturalistic and ecological interest of the landscapes they belong to. Biological and ecological risks due to invasive alien species are insignificant in the upper and middle basin and unknown in the lower basin. This situation of good biological integrity is attributable to the widespread high degree of naturalness of the ecosystems. However, this strength is threatened by human action. To safeguard the naturalness of the river ecosystems, the spread of plantations of alien plant species from commercial nursery production, which has been found in the middle and lower basin, is inappropriate.

Table 1.2 – The main threats facing river ecosystems in the Vjosa basin landscapes (taken and adapted from Sovinc, 2021:15). LEGEND: ++ very high threat; + high threat; 0 no threat; ? unknown.

THREATS	UPPER SECTION	MIDDLE SECTION	LOWER SECTION	TOTAL
Pollution				++
Solid waste/waste management	++	+	++	
Groundwater pollution	+	++	+	
Water pollution	0	++	++	
Land degradation				++
Industrialisation	0	++	++	
Urbanisation	0	+	++	
Hydromorphological change				+
Small hydropower plants	++	+	++	

[34] «Tamarisk, oleander, chaste tree galleries and thickets and similar low ligneous formations of permanent or temporary streams and wetlands of the thermo-Mediterranean zone [...]» (Doug, 2013: 132).

THREATS	UPPER SECTION	MIDDLE SECTION	LOWER SECTION	TOTAL
Land use				+/++
Oil dwelling + bitumen excavation and deposits	0	++	0	
Gravel extraction (industrial)	+	++	+	
Stone mining (industrial)	+	0	0	
Water extraction (bottiling/industrial)	0	++	++	
Water extraction / irrigation	0	+	++	
Firewood collection	0	0	0	
Poaching	+	+	++	
Plantations of alien commercial species	0	+	+	
Intensification of agriculture (pastures, regular burning), use of chemicals	0	+	++	
Transformation of former forested areas into croplands and pastures	0	++	++	
Tourism development	0	0	++	
Natural factors				+
Riverbank/coastal erosion	0	+	++	
Floods	0	0	+	
Invasive alien species	0	0	?	
Diseases	+	+	0	

The study area of this research is also affected by more environmental critical issues than those identified in Table 1.2.

The lower course of the valley of the Lëngarica River has two stretches with a clear geomorphological distinction. The valley narrows into a canyon of great ecological and scenic interest upstream of the Kadiu Bridge and the thermal springs in its vicinity. [Figs. 1.58 and 1.59] Whereas, the section widens considerably between the bridge and the confluence with the Vjosa at Petran, with gentle slopes on the hydrographic right and slightly steeper ones on the left.

The river ecosystems of these valley segments are impacted by hydraulic transformations for hydroelectric power production. Recent damming and catchment works have been carried out just upstream of the canyon. [Fig. 1.60] The critical impacts of the reservoirs are generally related to the alteration of the natural hydrology of watercourses. Management protocols need to ensure ecological runoff and a time-based distributed release of overflow or maintenance volumes in order not to generate ecosystem shocks. The Albanian company Lëngarica & Energy sh.p.k, a member of the Austrian group *Enso Hydro*, recently monitored the ecological flow from 1.1.2022 to 1.8.2023.[35] This essential variable of the landscape's environmental qualities has therefore been formally taken on. However, the observations conducted[36] in June 2021 and February 2022 in the lower valley, from the end segment of the canyon, just upstream of the thermal springs, to the confluence with the Vjosa at Petran, suggest that the ecological consequences of changes

[35] See < www.enso.at > (2024-01-31).

[36] Campaign for the observation of the landscape of the main valley bottom carried out by the author. The aim of this activity is to support the hypothesis of river greenways in the Vjosa basin as a policy of landscape conservation and enhancement, complementary to that of protected areas (see Chapter 4).

in the river's water regime should also be examined by ecological experts. Indeed, it is not sufficient only to conduct water volume measurement campaigns to understand, prevent or manage ecosystem impacts on watercourses and their consequences in terms of the loss of biological diversity and often scenic expressiveness. The plausible critical relevance of climatic factors on a global or at least geographical scale must also be taken into account. In the case of the Mediterranean region, global warming is occurring at speeds and intensities above global averages, which have led climatologists to identify it as a hot-spot to be specifically considered for adaptation needs (IPCC, 2022). As already noted, it is common for intense winter droughts to be added to summer droughts, with serious repercussions on the vegetative recovery of plants. In such a context, the clear trend dynamics make the ecological management of hydropower production even more necessary.

Figure 1.58 – View of the Lëngarica Canyon on the upstream side.

Figure 1.59 – Rocky outcrops in the lower reaches of the Lëngarica River upstream of the Kadiu Bridge.

Figure 1.60 – The middle valley of the Lëngarica River, upstream of the canyon, with the hydraulic works of damming and catchment for power generation.

In the valley of the Bënjë Stream, the most evident and widespread critical issues are related to soil erosion. In unstable rocky debris outcrops, which are also found on slopes with marked gradients, the predominant absence of soil prevents the formation of vegetation cover. This also contributes to making these parts of the slope more vulnerable to the hydrogeological instability.

1.2.3 Opportunities

The multitude of values of the watercourses in the Vjosa River basin has also been formally recognised at political-institutional level with the attribution of the "national park" category, according to the classification of the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN). This result was recently achieved due to various scientific evidences (Wickel & Galaitsi, 2017; Shumka *et al.*, 2018; Fontes *et al.*, 2019; Schiemer *et al.* 2020; Sovinc, 2021) and as a result of pressure exerted by international public opinion through multiple cultural initiatives.[37] After a preliminary political phase (2021), in the summer of 2022 a memorandum of understanding[38] was signed and at the end of that year the *Vjosa Wild River National Park. Vision, Road Map and Feasibility Study* report was published (Greca *et al.*, 2022). In March 2023 the national park was formally established and its operations are therefore now in the start-up phase.

The park's perimeter strictly refers to the river ecosystems of the Vjosa River course and those of its tributaries (Greca *et al.*, 2022). Although this is formally correct for the type of protected area, it may nevertheless be an overall weakness in the protection and enhancement policies that the park promotes. In fact, other areas of land that have systemic relationships with the Vjosa River and its major tributaries but that are not part of the park or other protected areas may have features of significant natural

[37] See footnote 31.

[38] «The Ministry of Tourism and Environment (...) is developing a comprehensive plan to enhance the level of protection of the Vjosa River from category IV: Natural Park to the level of the IUCN Category II: National Park, by Law No. 81/2017 "On Protected Areas," and also following the IUCN protected area standards.» (Greca *et al.*, 2022: 5). See < https://riverwatch.eu/sites/default/files/FEASIBILITY%20STUDY%20VJOSA.pdf > (2024-01-31).

interest and ecological, historical and archaeological, scenic and panoramic interest. In such cases, significant economic and social potential coexists with indications of landscape conservation that are in fact necessary conditions for the sustainability of development. However, the typological segmentation of activities found in the preliminary articulation of the park's recreational and tourism policies (Greca *et al.*, 2022), in the absence of a strategy to integrate them, may result in cumulative environmental loads that are unsustainable for river ecosystems, as well as being counterproductive over time for the dynamism of local socioeconomic systems.

In any case, these issues can be adequately dealt with in the planning and operational programming processes that the park managing body will have to develop in order to make protection policies effective. However, it is believed that the sustainable enhancement of the recreational and tourism potential of the landscapes could more effectively contribute to improving the economic and social conditions of the territories if the policies concerning it were not restricted to the direct spatial relevance of watercourses. From this prospective point of view, the national park plan and above all its local strategic and implementation variations could play an important role in promoting agreement among policies and actions integrated with the territories under ordinary governance and with those of existing neighbouring protected areas.

CHAPTER 2

Bënjë. A village and its people

Antonio Laurìa

Abstract: Bënjë is a village undergoing depopulation, perched on a hill overlooking the valley of the Lëngarica River, a tributary of the Vjosa. This chapter provides an overview of the historical, landscape, settlement, cultural, social and architectural aspects of the village. The primary source from which historical information about the village was obtained is the monograph *Bënja e Përmetit* written in 2002 by Viktor Kola. This formed the basis for subsequent information drawn from scientific literature and dialogue with locals (in particular with the last primary school teacher in the village), as well as personal considerations and suggestions from the author's relationship with the village and its stories.

2.1 Bënjë and its territory

Bënjë is a sloping village in the south of Albania, in the Gjirokastër region. It is located around 15 km north-east of Përmet (10 as the crow flies). [Fig. 2.1]

Together with the village of Novoselë, it is a district of the administrative unit of Petran which, in turn, is part of the municipality of Përmet along with the administrative units of Çarshovë, Frashër, Qendër Piskovë and Përmet itself.

Figure 2.1 – Bënjë on the map of the municipality of Përmet.

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

Figure 2.2 – Bënjë as it appears surrounded by greenery from the road leading to the village.

The main representative of the civil institutions is the village leader (*kryeplaku*, literally "the chief of elders") who is chosen by the inhabitants and remains in office for four years. The *kryeplaku* settles disputes between the inhabitants and plays an essential role as a mediator between the community's needs and the municipality.

Bënjë stretches over low mountainous terrain which reaches a maximum altitude of 898 m a.s.l. The geographical features are shaped by steep slopes that abruptly break into narrow valleys produced by the patient erosion of numerous watercourses. [Fig. 2.2]

The most important of these is the Lëngarica, a tributary of the Vjosa,[1] some 37 km long, which runs east through the territory of Bënjë. The Lëngarica Valley has always played a strategic territorial role due to the confluence of roads that connected the ethnographic area of Dangëllia with Shqeria and Kolonjës, where the river rises from several streams draining the waters flowing down the south-western slopes of the Gramos, a mountain range on the border between Albania and Greece (Lauria *et al.*, 2020).

Two winding streams flow down the sides of the hill on which the village stands: the Bënjë, on the left side, and the Oskrusheve on the right. Before flowing into the Lëngarica, the two watercourses join downstream of an Ottoman bridge: the *Ura e Bënjës* (Bënjë Bridge). Like many streams, the Oskrusheve and the Bënjë are also dry most of the time «like dead, dry snakes», but in winter they «rise again, swell, hiss, shout» (Kadare, 2021: 17), as evidenced by the high erosion marks left by the Bënjë on the bridge piers (see § 3.3) and memories of wooden bridges destroyed by the fury of the Oskrusheve (Kola, 2002).

The village area lies entirely within the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park, the largest in the country covering 34,361 hectares. The landscape features vines and juniper, oak, olive, walnut, plum, fig, pomegranate and white mulberry trees. At one time, a few peasant families in the village bred silkworms, produced yarn and exported the worms to other regions of Albania (Kola, 2002). In autumn, the strawberry trees and shrubs, with their green leaves, drooping panicles of white flowers and clusters of berries that turn from the yellow of the unripe fruit to the ruby red of the fleshy fruit, are particularly striking for their quantity and lushness. The woods around the village provide shelter for numerous species of wild animals typical of Mediterranean habitats: foxes, wild boars, deer, wild rabbits, tortoises, blackcaps, griffon vultures, imperial ravens, golden eagles, etc.

The territory of Bënjë is rich in cultural heritage: (1) an evocative and unspoilt landscape distinguished for its diverse ecosystems (Qiriazi, 2017), (2) an area that has been anthropised since ancient times, (3) several monuments of high historical and architectural value, (4) eight hot springs[2] and a thermal area near the Kadiu Bridge, a well-established tourist destination, and (5) a state-protected settlement of particular beauty.

[1] The Albanian Government recently (15.3.2023) established the Vjosa Wild River National Park. See § 1.2.

[2] The water temperature of these springs varies between 23 and 30°C and the flow is between 8 and 40 l/s (Kamberi *et al.*, 2014).

The landscape of Bënjë is one of water: it is home to both natural monuments – such as the Lëngarica Canyon and Thermal Baths – and Category I cultural monuments[3] – for instance the Bënjë Cave, the Kadiu Bridge, the Bënjë Bridge and the Old Grain Mill – linked to river culture.

The canyon (*Kanioni i Lengaricës*), declared a "natural monument" in 2002, is a long deep cut that exposes layers of limestone rock created by the steadfast erosive activity of the Lëngarica. Like any canyon, it is both unfathomable and dramatic with an overhang of almost eighty metres and a width, in some places, of only three metres.[4] Along its path, steep, layered walls come together and move apart. Lit parts alternate with shaded parts illuminated for a few minutes in the summer by sudden bursts of sunlight. In the light, the walls reveal infinite shades of colour. [Fig. 2.3]

Along the canyon is a vast system of karstic caves, some of which are connected by tunnels and galleries (Bashkia Përmet, 2020), that afforded shelter and protection to prehistoric peoples. According to Bërxholi (1987), these caves represent the oldest settlement of the Illyrian people in the region. Six kilometres from the confluence of the Lëngarica with the upper course of the Vjosa, at a point on the river that can only be crossed on foot, is the "Pigeons Cave" (*Shpella e Pëllumbave*), about ten metres from the river bed. Its earliest cultural layer would date back to the Copper Age (in Europe, 4th millennium BC). The cave is shaped like a corridor about 160 m long with branches and rooms of different sizes. As demonstrated by the archaeological finds, the cave was inhabited continuously until the Early Bronze Age and used until the Early Middle Ages (Lera *et al.*, 1983; Cabanes, 1998; Kola, 2002; Saliu, 2011; Korkuti, 2017). [Fig. 2.4]

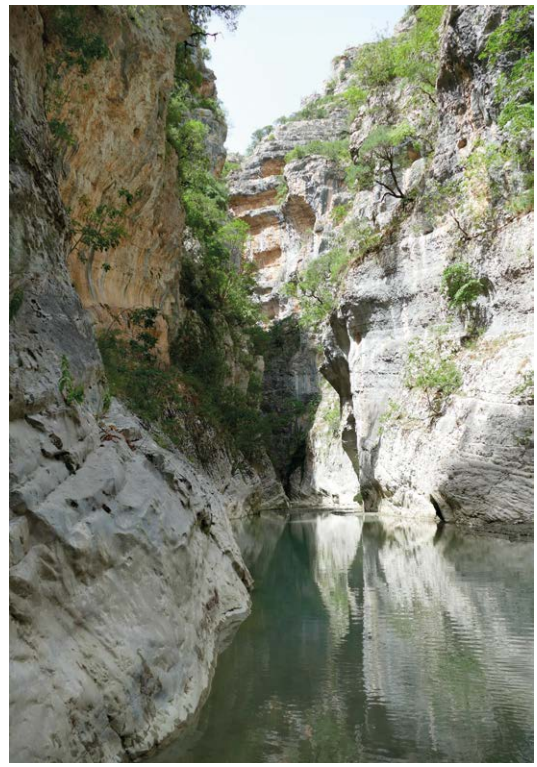

Figure 2.3 – The Lëngarica canyon.

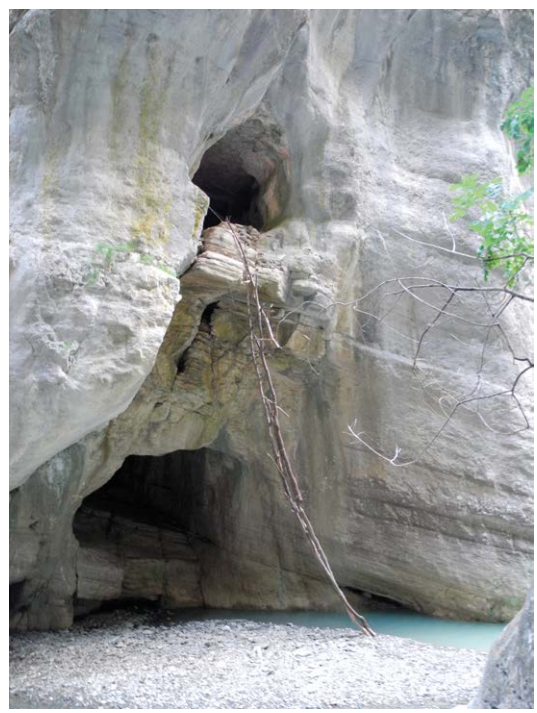

Figure 2.4 – The Pigeons Cave.

[3] In Albania, the expression "Cultural Monument" refers to all buildings of historical and cultural value subject to State protection. It is a concept that not only classifies cultural heritage, but also aims to regulate potential conservation and restoration works. Depending on the historic value of the building, two categories of cultural monuments can be: (1) "Category I", whose architectural and technical features (both exterior and interior) must all be preserved, and whose changes of form can only be reversible; (2) "Category II", where protection is limited to the exterior architectural features. See Law 27/2018 "On cultural heritage and museums" (*Per trashegimine kulturore dhe muzete*) and previous laws. See also Pompejano, 2020.

[4] In the various sources consulted (see, *inter alia*, Qiriazi, 2006; Dollma, 2018; Menkshi *et al.*, 2019), the dimensions of the canyon are always different. This seems to indicate that our knowledge of the canyon is still sketchy.

Figure 2.5 – A view of the Kadiu Bridge and the thermal baths.

Figure 2.6 – The ruins of the old Bënjë Mill.

The Bënjë Thermal Baths (*Banjat e Bënjës*) have been known since Roman times and probably gave their name to the village. They are part of the vast geothermal system extending from the Lëngarica to the Vormoner Gorge on the Sarandoporos River in Greece. Their waters have recognised beneficial properties and for centuries have been used to treat rheumatism, skin diseases, intestinal disorders as well as some animal diseases (Kola, 2002; Eftimi & Frashëri, 2018; Menkshi *et al*., 2019). [Fig. 2.5]

This is where the Kadiu Bridge (*Ura e Kadiut*) stands, fitting into the river landscape as a distinctive and iconic sign that gives the entire valley identity and character. (see § 1.1.2 and § 3.2) There are two other Ottoman bridges in the village area and they cross the Bënjë Stream (*Përroi i Bënjës*) at the points where the bed becomes narrower: the aforementioned Bënjë Bridge, [Fig. 3.21] which stands right at the entrance to the village, and the Aries Bridge (*Ura e Dashit*), now in a state of ruins and located on the border with the village of Vinjah.

Another characteristic feature of the Lëngarica river landscape is the Old Grain Mill (*Mulliri i Drithit*). Built in 1878, it is a rare case of a fortified mill on national scale and was used to grind wheat produced throughout the province (Kola, 2002). From the early 20th century, mills, mainly owned by ancient noble families or the Church (as in the case of Bënjë), were an essential component of the agro-food production chain based on the wheat produced in Korça (Adhami, 2001a). The Bënjë Mill, now in a state of ruin, is the last surviving evidence of the link between the river, agriculture and the community; no trace remains of the other ancient mills in the area.[5] [Fig. 2.6]

Due to its landscape and architectural value, Council of Ministers Decision No. 776 of 02.11.2016 recognised Bënjë as a "historical centre" and the area surrounding it as a "protected area" (see § 1.1.4.1). [Fig. 1.49]

2.2 Notes on the establishment of the settlement and the inhabitants

As testified by the cave constructions in the Lëngarica Canyon, a human presence in the Bënjë area dates back to the dawn of time (Cabanes, 1998; Saliu, 2011). According to Kola (2002), confirmation of the village's ancient origins lies in the fact that its inhabitants were owners of farmland near the Lëngarica Valley, the only flat land in the area.

In the first centuries BC, the spaces along the banks of the Vjosa and the neighbouring territories (Dangëlli, Shqeri, Nëmërckë and Dhëmbel) were called *Paravæa* (from *Aua*, the ancient name of the Vjosa River) and were populated by the Illyrian tribe of *Paravæj* (Leake, 1835; Frashëri, 1969).

An Ottoman tax register (*defter*) dating from 1431-1432 mentions a village named "Bano" or "Bana" in the area where Bënjë stands today, inhabited by 9 families (Buharaja, 2018).

The present-day village of Bënjë is probably the 'double' of this ancient settlement, traces of which remain at the foot of the nearby Bërceve hillock, in a small gorge protected from the wind. The reasons for the abandonment of the original settlement are unknown, and there is no certain information on the date the present-day village was founded. According to Kola (2002), the causes lie in the scarcity of water sources, the danger posed by numerous snakes [*sic!*] and the characteristics of the terrain.[6] The earthquake that scourged this part of Albania in 1851 may have also played a part in this decision (see Kárnik, 1971; Sulstarova & Kociu, 1975). Kola (2002) believes that

[5] The mill, still intact and working, can be seen in some scenes of the film *Njeriu me top* (Viktor Gjica, Albania, 1977), minutes 34-37. See < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDZghWXzz3c > (2024-02-03).

[6] These reasons are not convincing. Next to the Bërceve hillock there is an important water source (see § 2.1.4); snakes are probably a rhetorical figure of peasant culture, concealing something else.

migration from the old to the new settlement occurred in the mid-18th century. Engravings on the cornerstones and door jambs of the homes, however, bear later dates (from the second half of the 19th century to the first decade of the following century).

After 1878 (the year of the Greek aggression against the coastal areas in front of Corfu) the local inhabitants were joined by a few inhabitants from Lëkurës, a village on the grounds of Saranda, bringing with them not only livestock, but also craftsmanship in stonework and expertise in the cultivation of vines and fruit trees (Kola, 2002).

As of 1925, 9-10 poor families from the surrounding villages were accommodated in Bënjë (Kola, 2002).

Throughout its history, the village has never exceeded 160 inhabitants, all of whom are Orthodox Christians (Kola, 2002). [Tab. 2.1]

> Religious affiliation, while certainly an important element of identity, a point of unity that transcends territorial boundaries, has never been a divisive factor in the Përmet area, as it generally is in Albania. In Albania, the feeling of belonging to the homeland seems to prevail over religious sentiment. The poet Pashko Vasa, one of the protagonists of the Albanian Renaissance, in *O moj Shqypni e mjera Shqypni* (Oh Albania, poor Albania) from 1878, called Albanians to unity and brotherhood regardless of religion, because the true faith of the Albanian is "Albanianism" (see Elsie, 2005: 86).

Two social classes arose:

1. The middle peasant class (*fshatarë të mesëm*), who on average owned 8-10 *dynym*[7] of agricultural land and could also have other incomes;
2. The class of poor peasants (*fshatarë të varfër*), who had little or no land and were forced to work as agricultural labourers or road workers in order to survive.

All the inhabitants of Bënjë lived off a subsistence economy based on barter. On Saturdays, they would go to the bazaar in Përmet to sell the produce from their fields, milk, cheese, *raki* and cattle, and to buy whatever they needed (Kola, 2002).

Table 2.1 – Population trend from 1856 to 1945.

YEAR	SOURCE	HOUSES/ FAMILIES	INHABITANTS
1856	*Hronografia tis Epiru*	16	
1923	General Population Census (Selenica, T. *Shqipëria më 1923*, p. 82, 133; Kotani, A. *Leskoviku*, 2001. p. 66)		146
1927	General Population Census (Selenica, T. *Shqipëria më 1927*, p. 498)		160
1931-'32	Turkish Census (A. III 323 *Defteri i Përmetit dhe i Korçës* (translation from Turkish to Albanian by Vexhi Buharaja 1969, p. 38)	9	
1945	General Population Census (Registers of the Municipality of Përmet)		119

[7] The *dynym* (or *dunum* or *donum*) was a unit of area used in the Ottoman Empire, derived from the Byzantine *stremma*. It represented the amount of land that could be ploughed by a team of oxen in a day and corresponded to a plot forty standard paces in length and breadth (Ménage, 1973). It was originally equivalent to 919.30 m^2 and is still used in many areas of the former Ottoman Empire, although the 'new' *dynym* has been redefined as 1,000 m^2 or 1/10th of a hectare.

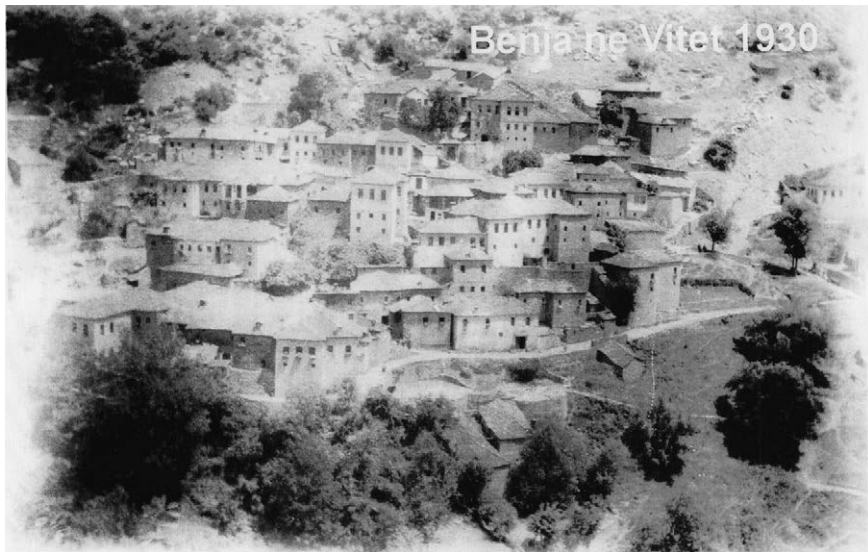

Figure 2.7 – *Above*: Bënjë in the 1930s. *Below*: Bënjë today.

Bënjë's fate was indelibly marked by World War II, when war events related to the Italian-Greek conflict destroyed a considerable part of the village leaving only about forty houses standing (Kola, 2002). Having repelled the Italian offensive, the Greeks forced their way into Albania, then part of the Kingdom of Italy. The Italian soldiers organised a defensive line on the left bank of the Lëngarica, while the Greeks stationed their artillery on the opposite bank: Bënjë had become a theatre of war. During these activities the village was struck, but the real destruction came later. The German army, which had joined the conflict to help the Italian army, occupied the village and at the end of January 1944 set fire to numerous buildings further down from the main road. Fortunately, the St Mary's Church was spared. The extent of the damage and the alteration of the original urban fabric can be appreciated by comparing the current situation with a historical photograph from the 1930s. [Fig. 2.7] The destroyed buildings were not rebuilt and the empty spaces, cleared of rubble, became vegetable gardens.

Emigration was an early factor of village life and it increased at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, peaking before World War II, during and after the War of Liberation from Nazi-Fascism and after the fall of the communist regime.

Viktor Kola, in his monograph on Bënjë, with patient research and infinite love, gives a face to the inhabitants of the village until the end of the 1970s, dividing them into three categories: (1) the natives, (2) those from Lëkurës, and (3) those from neighbouring villages. Next to the name of each family, he indicates the members, their occupations and place of residence. Lively annotations, in some cases, provide additional information. Moving stories emerge (such as that of a child found under the church door and later adopted) and many stories of emigration, some of them to distant countries (the United States, above

all, and even Australia) but also to Turkey, Italy, France, Belgium and Greece. Stories often tinged with a sense of nostalgia for the village where they were born, their ancestors, and a desire to return; stories, sometimes, crowned by success, and by personal achievement.

Kola poignantly describes the moment of the emigrants' departure, which usually occurred at dawn, when Venus, the morning star, had just risen. It was a collective ritual. Emigrants were accompanied to Naskove by their entire family. Often a shotgun was fired at the moment of departure from the village to warn the villagers and invite them to escort the emigrants and their family members (Kola, 2002). Naskove – writes Kola (2002: 78) – «was the place that witnessed all the separations and goodbyes, the hugs and the kisses, and the tears shed».[8]

Emigration is a sharp, double-edged weapon: while on the one hand it tears apart the social fabric or weakens it, creates suffering and breaks up families, on the other it builds bridges to the world and expands opportunities for knowledge. From the 18th century onwards, the Përmet area, including Bënjë, also received an important boost in socio-economic and cultural development from the repeated migration flows. The emigrants' remittances and the returnees' savings were invested in the village (e.g. to build or renovate buildings, in agriculture and in livestock breeding). Thanks to their experiences away from home, the emigrants introduced thinking, visions, and behaviour to Bënjë that were foreign to the village's physical, cultural and psychological development. Kola (2002) attributes the more open mentality of inhabitants of the Përmet area compared to that of other parts of Albania specifically to its inhabitants' resourcefulness in seeking elsewhere what they could not find at home. In addition to individual suffering and the social weakening of the departure place, as well as the mystique of "our scattered blood" (*giaku jonë i shprishur*), there is a pragmatic dimension to emigration: people leave for a place where they can earn more money, they make sacrifices, they earn money with a view to investing it at home and offering their family better growth opportunities (Abate & Behrmann, 2006).

> In the book *Il ballo tondo* (The Round Dance), by Carmine Abate, a writer born in an Arbëreschë village in Calabria, the main character's father (the "Mericano") goes to Germany whenever he needs to put money aside to achieve a goal: to buy a farm, renovate a house, for his daughter's wedding, etc. (Abate, 2005).

The 'internal' emigration from rural areas to urban centres is different, an expression of the territorial dialectic between the countryside and the city. For those who emigrate, it often takes on the sense of a final and irreversible choice, as was also the case in Bënjë particularly during and after the period of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Movement (*Lëvizja Antifashiste Nacional Çlirimtare*, LANÇ) and the establishment of Enver Hoxha's regime, when emigration from rural areas was directed exclusively to the country's major centres and mainly to the capital.

> Kola (2002: 78) explains this internal migratory wave as an effect of the «new development and employment prospects» linked to the reconstruction of the homeland, with the opportunity, previously reserved only for the more affluent classes, to complete higher education and even for marriage [*sic!*]. This reconstruction, frankly, seems to be somewhat sweetened: if Bënjë's young people, or at least some of them, had had the choice, they might have followed the path of their parents and grandparents and emigrated abroad.

The post-war situation was dramatic: between those who had emigrated, joined the army or died, the active population of the village had shrunk enormously. The village

[8] Author's translation from Albanian.

was half-destroyed, the fields had been abandoned due to a lack of labour power and working animals, remittances from emigrants had been interrupted since the beginning of the war, and the entire Përmet area had even been plagued by an invasion of locusts (Kola, 2002).

According to Kola (2002) (and from the author's interviews with villagers), the new National Liberation government took care of the rural areas of the country and also of Bënjë. Under Enver Hoxha's motto "T'u qepemi kodrave dhe maleve, t'i kthejmë ato në toka pjellore si dhe fushat" (Let us climb the hills and mountains and turn them into fertile plains), abandoned land was cleared, and vineyards and fruit trees (plum, apple, cherry…, even oranges and lemons) were planted. Applying the Agrarian Reform (1945), land was registered and land considered to be surplus was distributed to the poorest peasants. In 1964, the first agricultural cooperative was created in Bënjë (*Kooperativa bujqësore e Bënjës*) and more advanced agro-technical methods were introduced, for instance the use of chemical fertilisers and agricultural machinery such as tractors and combine harvesters (Kola, 2002). Compulsory education was increased to 14 years and evening classes for adults helped to raise the cultural level and combat illiteracy. Kola admits that alongside these initial achievements, planning errors were also made that compromised the development of the village and of its potential, and that in the 1970s the cooperative system degenerated to the point that privileges of position arose, along with bureaucratisation and disaffection on the part of members.

With the collapse of the communist regime (1991), depopulation increased significantly in Bënjë, as it did in many rural villages in Albania. [Fig. 2.8]

The village is currently inhabited by a few dozen people, most of whom are elderly. The last official survey (2019) indicated around 80 residents. According to a villager, there were between 45 and 50 inhabitants in the autumn of 2023. Among them were 4 children attending the school in Përmet.

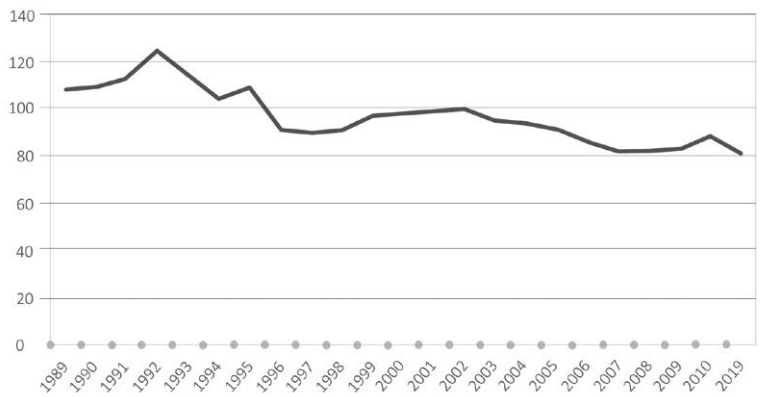

Figure 2.8 – Demographic development of the population of Bënjë from 1989 to 2019.

2.3 The village

Bënjë stands on the side of a south-facing hill, on small clearings and modest elevations that slope gently towards the Lëngarica Valley. The Bercëve Hillock can be seen slightly to the west.

Getting to Bënjë is not easy. The road (*Rruga e Bënjës*) is paved and in good condition up to the bend leading to the thermal area. From that point on, it becomes a rather rough dirt road, the last stretch of which is impassable when the Bënjë and Oskrusheve streams swell in winter.

2.3.1 The Architectural Complex of St Mary

Upon arriving in the village, the visitor comes upon the Architectural Complex of St Mary. To the north, it is crowned by a row of cypress trees. In the manner of Orthodox villages, the church (*Kisha e Shën Mërisë*) is located at the entrance to the village, outside of the village centre, adjacent to the cemetery.

Like an ancient *temenos*, the architectural complex, built on the slope thanks to measured terracing, is a balanced combination of solids and voids. In addition to the church and cemetery, a clever altimetric rhythm holds two other spaces together: the portico (*hajat*), a place for assembling, and the old village school. [Fig. 2.9]

A stone wall delimits "the shadow of the church",[9] framing a space that was once sacred. The enclosure has three interruptions: one towards the countryside (to the east) and two towards the village (to the west). One of the latter leads to the church and the other to the cemetery. In some places the retaining wall is dilapidated, while in others it is markedly leaning or bulging. Viktor Kola's book reveals that both entrances to the parvis originally had a similar design: an arch in the boundary wall framed a double-leaf doorway protected from above by a slightly protruding canopy. [Fig. 2.13]

> «And below the village», he wrote, «is the primary school and the beautiful church of Bënjë, with courtyards surrounded by high walls and many cypress trees, on either side of which are two heavy, arched, double-leaf doorways, covered from above.»[10] (Kola, 2002: 82).

The original entrance has remained only on the west side, towards the village. With the probable aim of ensuring the passage of vehicles, the entrance on the east side has instead been severely altered. Today, it appears as a wide tear in the stone enclosure, with no door. [Fig. 2.10]

The east parvis is a wide space gently sloping down towards the valley, characterised by the presence of the apse of St Mary's Church. The portico can be seen further down, on the left. [Fig. 2.11] On the south side, lower down, there is another long, narrow space that dialogues with the valley. On the opposite side stands the cemetery wall at the base of which is a stone bench. A small staircase created in the wall with protruding stone slabs connects this space with the cemetery. In the communist period, a small emporium was built under the cemetery wall, but it was later demolished.[11]

The most striking aspect is the silence, broken only by the sound of the wind in the trees. From here, Bënjë looks like a ghost village. The view of the valley is stunning. [Fig. 2.12] Closing one's eyes, one can imagine a time when this space was crisscrossed by the daily life of the village: a bearded priest passing by wrapped in his black cassock and the chattering of school children. Today, the only signs of life are a donkey grazing on the grass and some old Mercedes parked under the apse of the church.

In a photo taken from the website of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (*Instituti Kombëtar i Trashëgimisë Kulturore* - IKTK),[12] certainly prior to the last res-

[9] According to Article 1 of the *Kanun* (see footnote 23), the "shadow of the church" (*hije kishet*) was the space in which the church and the presbytery were built.

[10] Author's translation from Albanian.

[11] Kola (2002) is outraged by the desecration of the parvis (given the number of empty houses in the village), but curiously says nothing about the desecration of the church.

[12] See <https://iktk.gov.al/site/fotogaleri/> (2024-01-27).

toration work (2017), children can be seen playing in a green area. The south wall of the church bears the inscription: "Lufte për bukën është luftë për socializmin", that is: "The war for bread is the war for socialism."

Figure 2.9 – The Architectural Complex of St Mary, surrounded on the north side by tall cypresses.

Figure 2.10 – Access to the architectural complex from the road leading to the village.

Figure 2.11 – The east parvis.

Figure 2.12 – The view of the valley from the east parvis of the Architectural Complex of St Mary.

A rather steep dirt road leads from the town centre to the church entrance, which features a beautifully crafted limestone portal. [Fig. 2.13] The top of the portal features a single semi-circular stone block engraved with the date 1827 and animal, floral and religious motifs. This block is surmounted by a stone arch with ashlars of different sizes on which other symbols are engraved. The material, dimensional and

decorative characteristics of the semicircular block and the ashlars of the arch above are very different from the two portals of the church. Also considering the date, at least fifty years earlier than that of the church, they likely came from a pre-existing religious building, perhaps the Church of St Michael the Archangel which stood in the area where the Church of St Mary was built. The wooden gate of the entrance is in a very poor state of preservation; its locking system can still be glimpsed, consisting of a wooden post which was inserted into a space in the south side of the wall. Outside, to the north of the entrance, there is a small masonry *bench*.

Upon entering, one comes upon a small multi-level space (west parvis) dominated by the church façade and its pronaos (exonarthex). The paving consists of regular stone slabs, but in a short stretch near the entrance portal is the original *kalldrëm*, the traditional Albanian stone paving.[13] If it were not for the presence of the church, it could be the courtyard of a home. [Fig. 2.14] Slightly misaligned with the entrance is the curb of a well, now plugged with a stone slab.[14] The current shape of the west parvis is due to the renovation work carried out at the expense of the villagers in the years 1933-34. These works also affected the cemetery area (Kola, 2002).

On the right is the former school. [Fig. 2.15]

Figure 2.13 – The entrance to the Architectural Complex of St Mary from the inhabited centre.

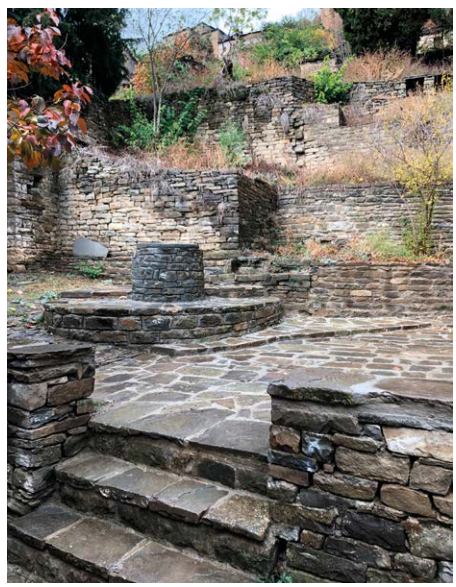

Figure 2.14 – A view of the west parvis.

Figure 2.15 – The building that housed the village school.

[13] As a testament to the skill of the Albanian stonemasons, the stone-paved streets in Turkey are still known as *arnavut kaldırımı* (Albanian cobblestones).

[14] According to Kola (2002: 28), strict rule governed the maintenance of the well «by always keeping it closed with a lid and by absolutely not allowing graves to be built in the ground above it, as decomposing bodies could have polluted its water through rain. Even the graves that were there in the past were removed and placed under the church.» (Author's translation from Albanian).

The east and west parvises are connected by a stone-paved pathway with a portico [Fig. 2.16] and, directly opposite, the pronaos of the *naos*.

Both the church and the portico were restored in 2017, while the old village school is in a state of serious disrepair.

Figure 2.16 – An interior view of the portico. The stone floor was laid during the last restoration works (2017).

2.3.1.1 The Church of St Mary

The Church of St Mary is in post-Byzantine style, like many other churches in southern Albania. [Fig. 2.17]

A 1904 stone plaque on the west wall of the *naos* explains that construction of the building was started in 1879 and it was inaugurated in 1891. The bell tower bears the date 1889 (a cross and the inscription "MAP"). Of the Church of St Mary we only know the name of the carpenter who made the iconostasis in 1904: Sionidhis, whose church plaque bears the epithet Πολύκαρπος (*Polykarpos*), the "talented", the "creative."

> The church was probably built by itinerant master builders (*mjeshtrat shëtitës stinorë*) who went from village to village searching for work opportunities (see Brunnbauer, 2004). They were organised, under the direction of a foreman, into groups of 10-12 people plus 2-3 apprentices (often family members), as well as 3-4 *argat* (unpaid helpers). Like the members of a coterie, they communicated in a professional language known as *purishte* (Muka, 2007, citing M. Kaucky; Prifti, 2012).[15]

[15] Itinerant master builders were particularly active in Albania at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a period characterised by the construction of major civil works (Mile, 1984; Muka, 2007; Meksi *et al*. 2016). After the Balkan Wars and World War I, the definition of new borders between Albania and Greece led to a reduction in the area of activity of the itinerant master builders; their gradual disappearance occurred in the following years (Muka, 2007).

The building is shrouded in an aura of legend. There are tales, in fact, of a priest who had dreamt of the icon of the Virgin arriving from the near village of Leusë and resting on the branch of an olive tree. In the dream, the Virgin asked the priest not to be left out in the open and that her abode be built on that very spot. The next morning, the priest went to the place where the dream took place and actually found the icon on the olive tree. At that point, after lengthy discussions, it was decided to build a new church dedicated to the Virgin, which would be more beautiful and larger than the existing one dedicated to St Michael the Archangel. The church was built at the villagers' expense and a contribution, admittedly a significant one, was made by people who had emigrated abroad. The fundraising to start the construction took several years. When work began, the question of the fate of the 'miraculous' olive tree arose. To make way for the church it had to be cut down. The villagers did not know what to do when a strong (and providential) wind suddenly blew the tree down, thereby dispelling any doubts (Kola, 2002).

The memory of the "miracle" of the founding of St Mary's Church has been passed down over time and is still celebrated every year on 21 November, the feast day of Our Lady of Bënjë. On this occasion, the Orthodox community in the area, from Çarshova, Petran, Piskova and Përmet itself, gather in Bënjë. Believers gather in the church at midnight and address prayers, supplications and requests for help to the Virgin (who is attributed the thaumaturgic power to heal nervous disorders).

Figure 2.17 – Façade and interior of St Mary's Church.

To enter St Mary's Church, one must pull the rope of the surviving bell of the elegant bell gable. After a short wait, a lady holding a large iron key is seen coming down the village lane who, after a brief nod of greeting, opens the church to visitors.

The church has a rectangular layout with three naves canonically oriented along an east-west axis, with the altar facing east. There are two entrances: one leads to the *narthex*, the other to the *naos*. Both entrances have a vaulted pronaos supported at the front by sturdy square pillars.

The interior space has the typical tripartite structure of Orthodox churches composed of a *narthex, naos* and *bema*. It appears clean and well cared for. Unlike other post-Byzantine Albanian churches in the area (including the beautiful Church of the Dormition of Mary in Leusë), there are no wall paintings in the Bënjë church except for the surfaces of the drum and dome.

The narthex acts as the filter between the outside world and the church. According to tradition, it is used by the catechumens and the non-Orthodox. Here, slender candles burn in three galvanised sheet-metal containers filled with earth and water, a sincere testimony of living devotion. [Fig. 6.2] A wooden spiral staircase on the north side leads to the *ginekonitis* or women's gallery.

From the narthex, three semicircular steps lead down to the *naos*. This houses four plastered columns with stucco capitals in late-Baroque style, which are rather unusual in the area (Lauria *et al.*, 2020). The columns are topped by arches supporting the central and side vaults. The first column on the left as one enters supports a beautiful wooden canopy with a pentagonal shape and featuring wooden panels depicting saints. The canopy is accessed via a wooden spiral staircase. The arches, at the springer, are connected to each other and to the outer walls by strong wooden chains. In the centre of the naos is the cylindrical drum of the dome with a painting of Christ *Pantokrator* surrounded by ten angels, unfortunately in a poor state of preservation. Twenty-four panels are painted on the drum: eighteen of them frame depictions of saints, while there are six loopholes in the others (one every three). [Fig. 2.18] The *naos* is also lit by four large windows on the north and south sides and three cruciform openings above the apse. These are similar in shape to those that, on the façade, illuminate the women's gallery. As in most traditional Eastern Orthodox churches, there are no pews facing the altar in St Mary's, but *stacidia*, seats with arms high enough to be used as support while standing, placed longitudinally along the side walls and at the sides of the nave of the *naos*.

Figure 2.18 – Representation of Christ *Pantokrator* surrounded by angels in the dome of the church.

The altar area (*bema* or *ajodhima*) with the semicircular apse, reserved for the officiating clergy, is at a slightly higher level than the *naos*; the separation is made final by the finely carved iconostasis in walnut, plane, chestnut and cherry wood, which is unfortunately badly damaged.

> The iconostasis, in Greek-rite churches, divides «the space of the faithful from the liturgical space, or rather of the manifestation of the sacred» (Campobasso, 2016: 73); it conceals from the faithful the sacred space of the *mysterium fidei*; according to St Gregory of Nazianzus, it separates earth from heaven, the known from the unknown (Fornari, 1933).

According to Llukani (2020a), the icons of the iconostasis were painted in 1894 by Kristodhuli and Thomai of Fjonat, a locality in the nearby Greek village of Konitsa about ten kilometres from the current Albanian border, where an iconography workshop was very active from the first half of the 18th century (Marolli, 2019-20). The icons present today are copies. Llukani (2002) states that the National Museum of Medieval Art in Korça houses an 18th century icon (77 x 41 cm) of the Virgin Mary by Terpo Zografi from the church. But what about the others?

We know that in 2009 a precious silver-covered icon depicting the Virgin (*konizma*) attributed to Pandeli Saqellari was stolen from the church (Llukani, 2014). In the same period, substantial parts of the iconostasis were removed, as can be seen by comparing a current photo with one from 2008, which shows the decorative wooden structure of the iconostasis still intact. [Fig. 2.19]

The floor is made of square slabs of stone; the floor of the *naos* features joints marked with a thick line of white paint; in correspondence with the dome, right where it projects on the ground, there is a decoration: a sun with twelve rays.

The external walls are approximately 115 cm thick and are presumably made of three-leaf stone masonry. The facing is made of regular rows featuring limestone and sandstone ashlars of different heights and lime mortar. The cornerstones, probably made of homogeneous masonry like the jambs of the openings, are finger-jointed to the masonry of the walls. As well as the ground connection of the building, the cornerstones are made of more carefully worked blocks than those of the walls and thin mortar joints; they are also sometimes larger than the corresponding elements of the walls.

Figure 2.19 – *Left.* The iconostasis today. *Right.* The iconostasis still intact (as far as the wooden part is concerned) in a photo from 2007.

The apse is the most finely worked part of the exterior walls. The texture of the facing generates discontinuity with that of the wall by alternating thinner elements with larger elements. It also has nine pilaster strips ending at the top with eight small arches made of the same light-coloured stone used for the portals and for the frames of some of the windows. Each of the lunettes of the arches bears a bas-relief; one of the best preserved shows the Tree of Life rising from the cross. Above the openings of the apsidal wall, just below the slight overhang of the roof cornice, is a six-pointed star (a hexagram rotated 90° in relation to the Seal of Solomon) inscribed in a circle housing the eye of God which guards the valley and seems to admonish those who enter the sacred precinct. [Fig. 2.20]

In the communist period, the church was used as a grain and timber store.[16] All in all, it was lucky as the other four churches in the territory of Bënjë were all destroyed.

The church was only reopened for worship in 1991.

Figure 2.20 – *Left.* Detail of the apse and east façade. *Right.* Detail of two bas-reliefs.

2.3.1.2 The cemetery

The cemetery stands on the long, narrow terrace between the church and the village. It is accessed through an opening in the boundary wall on the same side as the entrance to the west parvis, but higher up. Here there is a simple wooden gate made of vertical twigs nailed to thin horizontal boards. [Fig. 2.39] There are niches on the section of the wall facing the east parvis. According to one villager, they used to house the priest's beehives.

Originally, the dead were buried wrapped in a simple sheet. A plaque placed on the ground indicated the essential information: name and surname, date of birth and death, and who had taken care of the burial of the deceased. Later, the dead were placed in a wooden coffin and more elaborate marble tombs were made that were raised above the ground. Sometimes the grave was marked by a wrought-iron fence.

The history of the village cemetery is not easy to reconstruct. From Kola (2002) we know that as part of the 1930s redevelopment of the exterior spaces of the church, the corpses were exhumed and the remains housed in a locked room called the "qimitero." No further information is given about this room. Kola attributes the reason for

[16] In 1967, the Albanian government declared Albania an atheist state; in 1976, the ban on religious beliefs was introduced into the Albanian Constitution, a unique case in the world.

the removal of the bodies to the fact that the decomposition of the corpses polluted the well water. He delights in the transformation of the cemetery into a flower garden. A 'new' cemetery was built down from the church. Kola also points out, with some disappointment, that the villagers later resumed burying the dead in the 'old' cemetery.

The village cemetery is quite well kept. There are some broken tombstones, but in general a certain level of care and a persisting emotional bond between the living and the dead is apparent. On some recent graves there is a cascade of brightly coloured artificial flowers. On one of them, someone left two packets of cigarettes (one a Greek brand; the other an American brand) and a lighter, protected in a recess. [Fig. 2.21]

Figure 2.21 – Two packs of cigarettes and a lighter: the grave goods that accompany the deceased into the afterlife.

2.3.1.3 The portico

The portico (*hajat*) is located right in front of the southern door of the church leading to the *naos*. The floor of the church and that of the porch are separated by a height difference overcome by four semicircular steps and the small road connecting the west and east parvises. The church and portico are also structurally connected by the pronaos of the *naos*.

The porch is a well-proportioned open-covered space. The permeability between the church and the valley is ensured by wide arches supported by stone columns. The arches are stiffened by strong wooden ties. The roof has a truss structure and a covering of thin stone slabs, like all the buildings in the village. There are stone seats under the arches, which run along the long sides of the rectangle. [Figs. 2.16 and 2.22]

The porch was a meeting place for the men of the village after church services; this is also where they held village assemblies. Wedding parties were also held in the portico. During the communist years, the arches were partly filled in and the portico was transformed into the "House of Culture" (*Shtëpia e Kulturës*): it became a place for political discussions as well as convivial moments and dance parties for the village girls and boys. In the 1960s it was used as the henhouse of the agricultural cooperative (Kola, 2002).

Figure 2.22 – The portico and its relationship with the church.

2.3.1.4 The Old Village School

The school building is built on a hillside: on the lower side it has three levels and on the upper side two. On the upper side, there used to be a kindergarten on the ground floor and a primary school on the first floor. The first floor is reached by an external staircase under which a fountain has been created.

The primary school is a single room with eleven large windows. It was attended not only by children from Bënjë, but also by those from the villages of Novoselë and Tremisht. Heating was provided by a wood-burning stove. [Figs. 2.23 and 2.24]

Figure 2.23 – The old school of the village.

Figure 2.24 – Interior views of the school in photos taken in 2008.

Before communism, instead of a kindergarten, there was a guesthouse (*konakët*), which accommodated the priest (and his family) and the teacher. Each of the two lodgings consisted of a simple room with a fireplace.

The school played an important role in village life (according to Kola, 2022, there were very few illiterate people in Bënjë) and helped to establish a feeling of nationalism and the Albanian language.[17] Since it was established, teaching was mixed: girls and boys studied together.

This building is now in a serious state of disrepair. Cracks and a broken lintel can be seen in the exterior walls. The floors cannot be walked on; the one separating the kindergarten from the school is precariously shored up. [Fig. 2.25] In 2015, the school was closed due to a lack of students; the school furniture and teaching materials were taken to Petran.

Figure 2.25 – The former village kindergarten today. At the top you can still see a fragment of the wall that separated the priest's quarters from the teacher's quarters before communism.

[17] Classes were originally taught in Greek.

2.3.2 The inhabited centre and public space

Figure 2.26 – Bënjë: a forest of houses.

With St Mary's Architectural Complex on the left, the main village road (*Guri i Konomit*) runs through the entire settlement, dividing it into two quarters (*mëhalla*), upper and lower. Four roads branch off from the main road, following the morphology of the slope. The width of the streets in Bënjë is strictly commensurate with the passage of loaded pack animals; at the narrowest points, the corners of the buildings are chamfered to facilitate their passage. [Fig. 2.33, left] The roads are uneven and can only be travelled on foot; in large sections they are unpaved. Sections in *kalldrëm* are still present in the steepest parts. In October 2023, the entrance to *Guri i Konomit* was paved in *kaldrëm* by the villagers.

The village is characterised by the close link between the houses, the agricultural outbuildings and the tiny pattern of vegetable gardens created on the terraces that shape the slope. [Figs. 2.26 and 2.27] Usually bordered by drystone walls, vegetable gardens mark the boundary of the property and also play a role in reconnecting the domestic space with cultivated fields. Terracing is also linked to the cultivation of olives and vines. The grapevine arbor is a 'relic' of the traditional wine-growing landscape that continues to be preserved and handed down over time. It is also cultivated in the courtyard of homes (Lauria, *et al.*, 2020).

For the villagers, trees were a valuable resource to be carefully protected: in the sloping areas close to the settlement, it is not uncommon to see semi-circular walls to limit the effects of soil erosion and retain rainwater. [Fig. 2.28] Strict rules were observed for their maintenance: within the village, in the surrounding groves, and in places at risk of landslides, it was categorically forbidden to cut or damage any fruit or non-fruit trees. The areas where firewood, construction timber and even timber for fences (*gardhi*) could be cut were carefully defined. Control of the trees was entrusted to a "tree warden" (*roje të drurëve*) paid by the community. Similarly, grazing areas for small livestock, cattle and beasts of burden were permanently allocated. This is why, in Bënjë, the stables were outside the town centre (Kola, 2002).

Figure 2.27 – Following the natural profile of the land, the house, the vegetable garden, the road and the cultivated fields shape the slope.

Figure 2.28 – A small dry-stone wall protecting an olive tree near the village.

Bënjë, like other villages in the area, does not have a square. This is also surprising to an Italian observer because in the same Arbëreshë villages in southern Italy, the square is the main centre of neighbourhood social life (*gjitonia*) (see Bellizzi & Bellizzi, 2018). In Bënjë, however, there was no shortage of spaces for forging relationships, starting with the church porch, and at one time they were divided by gender.

On the outskirts of the village, on the eastern side, there is an open space with a stone bench known as *Ndërgurë* (Between the Stones). Until the 1960s the village men used it as a meeting place in the evenings. The *Ndërgurë* tells of a time when a self-sufficient community lived within a limited space comprising the village and little more, a place that met almost all of life's needs. [Fig. 2.29]

An equally important role for the community was played by the *Gurrëza e fshatit* fountain and the threshing floors (*lëma*).

Figure 2.29 – The *Ndërgurë,* once the main meeting place for the men of the village.

The fountain can be reached via the now bramble-covered path leading to the Bercëve hillock, where the original settlement of Bënjë, later abandoned, may have stood. Along the path one comes across a large, regular-shaped stone that was used to sharpen knives and scythes. [Fig. 2.30] The fountain is located in a very attractive landscape, characterised by a large sloping rock bank, strawberry trees and, above all, a majestic hollow plane tree. The cavity is blackened by smoke from the fire that was lit for years and years to heat water for washing clothes and to produce *raki*, the typical Albanian grappa. [Fig. 2.31] The water, which flows from a stone spout in a now crumbling stone wall, was once the main source of drinking water for the villagers. On either side of the fountain there used to be two high ledges for placing cloths to be washed, as seating or as a foothold for easier loading of beasts of burden with small wooden barrels or other containers. The *Gurrëza e fshatit* was a daily work and meeting place for women, but also a place for courtship: «How many boys and girls», writes Kola (2002: 27), «met there, talked and smiled to their friends, splashed each other with cold water and perhaps exchanged a promise of love.»[18]

[18] Author's translation from Albanian.

Figure 2.30 – The stone used for sharpening iron tools.

Figure 2.31 – The large plane tree next to the *Gurrëza and fshatit.*

The threshing floors are valuable evidence of Bënjë's agricultural identity and of peasant culture. Like cemeteries, they were sacred places on which it was absolutely forbidden to build. This tradition has helped to preserve them in many Albanian rural contexts (Muka, 2007; 2011), but not in Bënjë. According to Kola (2002), there were four grain barns in Bënjë, two in the upper and two in the lower part of the village. They belonged to four distinct families but were used by everyone. According to one villager's account, in one of these barns the main constituent elements can still be identified (the pavement and, in the centre, the hole for the pole to which the beasts of burden were attached during threshing).

At the foot of the village, in a small clearing called *Sheshi i Arixhinjve* (Gypsy Square) by the villagers, nomadic artisans,[19] who were forbidden from entering the villages, sold their wares (baskets and coffee, mainly) and predicted the future. They built their tents along the village streams, where there were willow trees which they used for their work (Kola, 2002). We can imagine that when the gypsies arrived this space came to life, becoming a place of encounter and exchange where the echoes of events taking place far away could be heard. Market day must have been highly anticipated by the inhabitants of Bënjë and neighbouring villages: only places that were the scene of events relevant to the life of a community are remembered with a place name. Today, no outward signs evoke the events that took place in Gypsy Square, but so long as its memory is kept alive this – otherwise anonymous – terrain will come alive once again with suggestions that everyone can shape and pass on according to their own culture and imagination. Nowadays, on 21 November, the feast day of St Mary of Bënjë, Gypsy Square is used as a car park, given its flat morphology and proximity to the road and church.[20] [Fig. 2.32]

Figure 2.32 – The "Gypsy square." Above left, the village.

[19] They were probably craftsmen from the Cigan (or Romani) community, who came from north-west India in the Middle Ages, or from the Jevgjit community, who may have emigrated from Egypt during the Turkish invasions of the 15th century. These communities settled throughout the Balkans, including Albania. (Adhami, 2001b).

[20] According to one villager, the market took place until the middle of the 1980s.

2.3.3 Houses and the spaces between the houses

Bënjë is a stone village: the streets, walls and roofs of the buildings are made of stone.

Rural villages in inland areas often have uninhabited roads and neighbourhoods, usually those furthest from services and roads, alongside inhabited roads and neighbourhoods (Teti, 2014). In Bënje, ruined houses alternate with inhabited, well-kept houses and form a whole. Abandonment and care, absence and presence, past and present seem to go hand in hand. In the silence, one suddenly catches signs of life: the puff of smoke from chimneys, the colourful beehives of a beekeeper, a satellite television dish, the braying of a donkey, cats scurrying like lizards from piles of stones… Where nature resumes the role that was momentarily taken away from it, tall grass, brambles and even a few wild fig trees grow up between the streets and the houses. [Fig. 2.33] Only locals, both human and non-human, and curious travellers enter these roads with blurred contours, imaginary border lines that are best not crossed.

In Bënjë, the houses are so close to each other that they give the impression of forming a single aggregate. But make no mistake: houses that all look the same on the surface are actually not the same at all. As in every town and village, in Bënjë there were the poor and those who were less poor.

Figure 2.33 – Village streets overgrown with weeds and scattered stones.

The social level and economic availability of households is reflected in the characteristics of the houses. In the more stately homes, built or modernised often thanks to the sacrifices and savings of emigration, there is no lack of sober decorative concessions. [Fig. 2.34]

The construction of the houses was assigned to experienced master builders and craftsmen from neighbouring towns and was regulated by verbal agreements. The foremen procured the building material and oversaw its transportation. During construction, the workers were guests of the owner of the house. It is easy to imagine that family members participated in the making of the house. After the roofing was completed, the builders hung the gifts they had received from villagers on the walls of the house, accompanying this action with a hammer blow and reciting the auspicious phrase *Gëzuar shtëpinë e re!* (Happy new house!) (Kola, 2002).

Figure 2.34 – The Priftit house (1868), one of the most beautiful in the village.

Most houses in Bënjë are two-storey; only a few have three storeys. Some, such as the *kulla* - the traditional Albanian tower houses widespread in the north of the country (Drançolli, 2001; Muka *et al*., 2004) - only have windows in the highest parts of the building. The similarity ends there. While the windows of the *kulla* are narrow loopholes, «like half-closed eyes in front of infinite space»,[21] in Bënjë the windows are quite wide and proudly open onto the valley. «If you entered the room and looked out of these windows," writes Kola (2002: 88) with regard to the now defunct house of the Ibrushit family, «you felt as if you were in the captain's cabin of a steamship, in front of which a wide horizon opened up, stretching from the villages of Delvinë, Ogdunan, Grabovë to the top of Papingut, towards Petran.»[22]

The houses in Bënjë have rectangular and L-shaped floor plans; at one time there were also E-shaped houses, such as the Kolocev family home (Kola, 2002).

The houses are typically built around a small courtyard (*oborr*) enclosed by dry stone walls.

The entrance to the courtyard of the home is more than just a break in the boundary, a cut in a wall: it is a micro-environment charged with meaning. According to Porphyry of Tyre, the threshold is an expression of the dialectic between 'inside' and 'outside': it is a sacred thing (Porphyry [3rd-4th century], 2006). In Bënjë, and as is always the case in the peasant home shrouded in a magical dimension, the threshold is protected by amulets and talismans to ward off evil, misfortune and danger and to propitiate good fortune, well-being and health. [Fig. 2.40] In geometric terms, at the opening, the boundary wall rises and bends ninety degrees defining a small space covered with a canopy. In the centre of this space is the door; at either end there are two stone benches (*sofat*), a distinctive element of Alba-

[21] This is a line from Ismail Kadare's poem *Bjëshket e Namuna* (Accursed Mountains). To read the whole poem in the original language, see Kadare (2008).

[22] Author's translation from Albanian.

nian rural architecture (Riza, 1972; Adhami, 2001b). A plaque with the family name and the year the house was built is often placed on the side walls or door posts. With respect to the boundary wall, at the opening the masonry apparatus is much more accurate, the stone blocks are squared and walled with lime mortar. Sometimes there are decorations. The entrance (like the edges of doors and windows), for hygienic reasons, is often painted with milk of lime. The entrance is also a symbol of hospitality. Thanks to the canopy, the guest does not have to «wait in the rain for the door to be opened, while the welcoming gesture of the place gives you the feeling that you have almost been let in already.» (Herzberger, 2005: 34). If the guest is elderly or tired, they can sit on the *sofat* while they wait for the door to be opened. But there is more to it. In a scenario where public space is limited to the street, it is also a providential relational space that regulates the transition between the private and public spheres. The owners of the house sitting on the *sofat*, perhaps with the 'excuse' of doing small household chores, while claiming the right to control the space immediately surrounding their home, demonstrate that they are open to interaction with others. [Fig. 2.35]

Figure 2.35 – Entrance to the courtyard of a village house with the traditional *sofat*.

The courtyard acts a distributive and service point for the activities of domestic life, but it also represents the status of the family. In houses that are still inhabited, the courtyard is a cosy place which is kept surprisingly well. Grape arbors are often present for decorative purposes, to protect against the summer heat and for home consumption. [Fig. 2.36] The courtyard often contains the kitchen (*magjirotë*), the toilets, the chicken coop and agricultural outbuildings that are a feature of rural village life.

Originally, the ground floors of the dwellings housed the pantry, the harvest store, the stable for the beasts of burden and the feeding troughs. Over time, the use of these rooms changed: they were usually converted into living spaces, like the upper floors.

The houses have between four and ten rooms (in three-storey buildings).

In the layout of the domestic space, the main rooms were the hearth room (*shtepia e zjarrit*) and the guest room (*oda e miqve*).

Figure 2.36 – A courtyard with colourful beehives.

Along with *oborr*, the *shtepia e zjarrit* is the place that best represents the dimension of everyday life. Here the family would gather around the hearth or *sofra*, the low, circle-shaped table where, in the Turkish manner, one eats sitting cross-legged. It is also a space charged with symbolic values. The fire was always burning as extinguishing it would herald a period of misfortune and bad luck for the whole family. Sometimes the head of the family slept in the *shtepia e zjarrit* (Muka, 2007).

The *oda e miqve* is the room in the house reserved for men and the main family rituals, such as wedding feasts and funerals (Muka, 2007). This room, generally located on the top floor and in a privileged position, was used to receive distinguished guests who lodged here for extended stays. The idea of the sacredness of the host in Albanian culture is well known: «The house of the Albanian belongs to God and the guests», states Article 96 of the *Kanun*.[23] In the Përmet area, there is marked respect for the stranger. [Fig. 2.37]

> In the past, guests visiting the house for the first time were offered a lamb or kid, a privilege that the owners normally only granted themselves on important occasions. In particular, the head of the animal was left for the host as a sign of respect. The welcome was accompanied by a precise ritual: the guest was reserved one of the corners of the *oda* in general diametrically opposite to the one where the host sat; other family members often joined the feast (Saliu, 2011).

[23] The *Kanun* is a customary code that regulated and punctuated the lives of the inhabitants of the mountainous areas of Albania down to the most minute aspects. The rules of the *Kanun* date back to the Middle Ages and were only transcribed in the early 1900s by a Franciscan friar: Shtjefén K. Gjeçov. The Kanun «represents a system of interpretation and values, a symbolic universe, by adhering to which the individual integrated himself into society and constructed his own identity.» (Martucci, 2021). For an understanding of some aspects of the *Kanun*, such as the *besa* (pledge of honor) and the *gjakmarrja* (blood-taking), see Ismail Kadare's wonderful book *Broken April* (Kadare, 1990). It should be noted that the Kanun was in force in northern Albania. In the rest of the country, as in many other Indo-European rural areas, respect for the host is deeply rooted. (see Marlekaj, 1952).

Figure 2.37 – Guest rooms in abandoned buildings of Bënjë.

The ritual of hospitality, despite having gradually weakened due to the profound transformations that took place both during the regime and thereafter, is still operating in different forms. In Bënjë, the village's last teacher, Sotir Nauni, welcomes tourists to his *oda* and performs the ancient ceremony of welcoming them with *raki* and *gliko* (a fruit-based compote typical of the Përmet area). The ceremony ends with a brief word of thanks and the signing of the guest register.

> The Italo-Albanian anthropologist Fatos Dingo has called for a distinction between a temporary guest and a foreign guest who wants to stay. The former is «almost divine, sacred, untouchable»; the latter is «an intruder in the living space or a risky neighbour who disrupts the balance of belonging and identity.» «The guest», he explains, «is a temporary interruption of everyday life and cannot remain there for long» so as not to generate conflicts between principles of identity and respect for others (Dingo, 2007: 105), between *established* and *outsiders* (see Elias & Scotson, 1965).

The *oda* was lit by large windows protected by embroidered curtains. Usually, under the windowed wall and the two side walls there was a "U" shaped *sofat*, the shape most suitable for conversation; on one wall were wall cupboards (*musëndra*), whose shelves held the good dishes, those for the celebrations.

2.3.4 Notes on the construction features and state of preservation of the buildings

The houses in Bënjë largely retain the original characteristics of the time of their construction. Some of them, however, have undergone alterations and modifications over time with respect to the original layout: in particular, additions and work to the windows (enlargements, with the consequent replacement of the lintel, and infilling) and alterations brought about by work on the installed systems were noted. It was rare to find alterations carried out with materials or technologies that were not local. New constructions, made with materials outside of the tradition, are few and mostly limited to small spaces in the home.

The load-bearing walls of the housing can be defined as three-leaf wall constructions. [Fig. 2.38, left] The inner core is made of predominantly weakly bonded stone material; the facing is made of squared stones laid with lime mortar in the more stately houses and uncoursed rubble masonry with mud joints in the more modest ones.

Within the load-bearing walls, there are often continuous timber devices (repeated with regularity in height) connected to each other transversally by elements also made of wood. The presence of wooden curbs and latticework within the masonry, tie-rods in the arches, anchor bars and bolts point to the seismic history of the village and attempts to cope with horizontal actions. [Fig. 2.39]

In the stately homes the wall structures are good quality overall with carefully executed cornerstones and string-course cornices; in the more modest ones, executive defects are more frequent, such as, for example, incorrect wall toothing in corner solutions. In all of them, there are decorations engraved in the stone with religious or esoteric symbols and motifs relating to peasant culture. [Fig. 2.41]

The boundary and retaining walls are made of irregular dry stones. [Fig. 2.40]

Figure 2.38 – Ruined buildings are like open books. They offer an extraordinary opportunity to learn about the materials, technologies and construction methods of their time.

Figure 2.39 – Masonry textures.

Figure 2.40 – Detail of the cemetery enclosure wall.

Figure 2.41 – Sacred symbols and amulets on the walls of village houses.

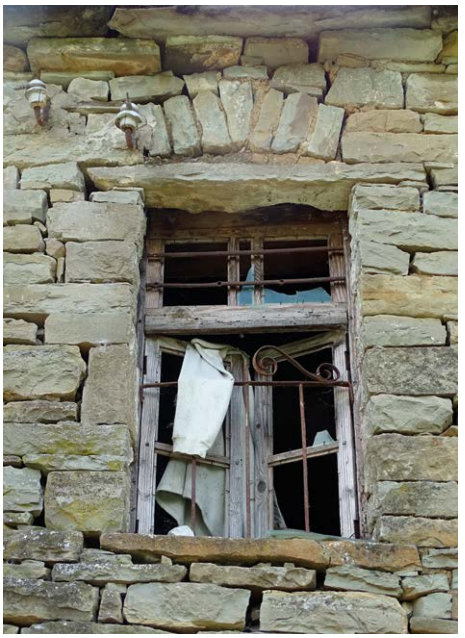

Figure 2.42 – Typical architrave system of the Permët region.

Figure 2.43 – Stone lintel surmounted by a graceful composition of stone ashlars with a three-point arch and four round arches.

The upper parts of the openings present different types: from simple ones with wooden or stone lintels to more complex ones with a lintel and jack arch with a small mullion on the intrados, as also found in the ancient centre of Përmet. [Fig. 2.42] Generally speaking, the jack arches consist of roughly rectangular ashlars with a straight extrados to facilitate their joining with the ashlars of the facing, but there are also those with a curved extrados. In one house there is an unusual solution where the stone lintel is surmounted by a graceful composition of stone ashlars worked in the form of an inflected arch with three centres and four circular arches. The solution (perhaps of Islamic ancestry) displays uncommon mastery in the execution and geometric control: in the lower part the inflected arch has a concave curve and in the lower part two convex curves. [Fig. 2.43]

In the more stately houses, the windows of the *oda* have a distinct feature: while in the area corresponding to the face of the wall they are rectangular in shape (with a lintel and a discharging arch), on the inside the masonry structure forms an arch. [Fig. 2.37] These are two independent (though tied) structures expressing two distinct architectural languages. Perhaps the owners of these houses did not want to introduce a distinctive element into the outward appearance of the houses, and therefore, into the urban landscape, but at the same time, they did not want to forgo satisfying their own aesthetic taste.[24]

The size of the windows increases from the ground floor to the other floors. The traditional window frames have the same design: two leafs and a tripartite transom. Even on the highest floors, windows are protected with bars. The windowsills are made of a stone slab.

The walls of the agricultural outbuildings are made in a more cursory manner, with irregular dry-stone or laid with mud; [Fig. 2.44] in some cases, the walls are made of a framework of wooden branches filled and lined with mud. [Fig. 2.38, right]

The roof is predominantly hipped. The structure is made of sometimes rather elaborate woodwork; horizontal actions are controlled by ties. In general, the carpentry shows a certain level of care in execution with single and double interlocking connections, often reinforced by nailing. The roof beams are connected by means of a wooden sleeper, placed above the inner leaf of the three-leaf stone masonry. The planking on which the dry-assembled local stone roofing rests bears directly on the carpentry.

The cornices have little overhang; in the more stately houses they are formed of corbels and stone slabs.

The inter-floor floors are wooden. They generally have a span of no more than 4 m. They are made up of a grid of small elements with a square cross-section. In the thickness of the beam, starting from the intrados, there are first transverse stiffening elements and then elements with a smaller section than the previous ones placed longitudinally.

[24] The same technical solution is used in the windows of St Mary's Church and the former village school.

The latter are intended to limit the deflection of the planking, which is nailed directly onto the beams and forms the floor. The floors at ground level are likely to have the same structure as the inter-floors.

In addition to the plastered reed ceilings, in the *oda* of the more stately houses there are wooden plank false ceilings with a simple decorative apparatus, sometimes with brightly painted details.

The partition walls have a wooden frame onto which boards are nailed or thin woven branches are woven. The plaster is made of mud (often containing plant fibres) and lime.

Figure 2.44 – Detail of the load-bearing masonry of an agricultural outbuilding.

Overall, the widespread buildings are in a critical condition; many buildings are in a state of ruin. As is to be expected, the most severe instability affects buildings that have been unoccupied for the longest time and those that have been constructed with less care. In many cases, these buildings are in urgent need of securing with a view to future consolidation and restoration work. In several buildings, collapsed roofs can be seen. The resulting water infiltration has damaged and continues to inexorably damage all the building elements. There is an abundance of weedy shrub vegetation. Over the years, seismic tremors, landslides and subsidence have damaged many buildings.

2.3.5 Public businesses and services

There is not a single shop or artisan's workshop in Bënjë. At least in appearance, only the electricity posts indicate the presence of institutions.

Based on the testimonies of some inhabitants, both the water service (renewed in the last decade) and the electricity network (built in the 1970s) ensure the household needs throughout the year. A critical element, on the other hand, is the state of safety of the wiring systems in the houses and public lighting, which is provided by lampposts mounted on concrete poles (which also distribute electricity to the houses) which negatively impact the traditional architecture of the village.

An equally serious problem is the absence of a waste water treatment plant, so it drains into a stream adjacent to the town centre.[25]

There is no waste collection or processing service in Bënjë. The inhabitants dispose of waste in an open dump on a slope to the west of the village and it is then periodically set on fire.

All basic public services are lacking, with the exception of health care, which is limited to the presence of a doctor and a nurse one day a week, who can be contacted by telephone in case of emergency, and the school bus service to Përmet.

[25] Wastewater treatment is a priority explicitly mentioned in the Development Plan of this area (*Plani Operacional i Zhvillimit Vendor*), which is also mentioned in the General Local Territorial Plan (*Plane të Përgjithshme Vendore*) of Përmet. See § 1.1.4.1.

CHAPTER 3

A path to Bënjë

Abstract: Among the various actions that can be taken to initiate a regeneration process in Bënjë, the chapter focuses on the creation of a path that leads from the thermal area next to the Kadiu Bridge to St Mary's Architectural Complex at the foot of the village. After an introductory paragraph outlining the project coordinates, a description is given (§ 3.2) of the overall richness of the landscape along the path. The narrative of the route, broken down into distinctive sections detected through field surveys, reveals an appreciable diversity of landscape and significant potential for recreation and tourism. The third and final paragraph considers the dense network of ancestral paths criss-crossing the territory under analysis. These infrastructures, of which often only particular sections and testimonies remain today, were carefully guarded in the past and played a pivotal role in connecting communities. In particular, there is a focus on minor and widespread elements and monumental landmarks that characterise the path from the Kadiu Bridge to Bënjë and their close relationship with the different orographic and geological conditions posed by the environment.

3.1 A proposal for the regeneration of the village

Antonio Lauria

Bënjë and its territory, as seen in the previous chapter, are home to important cultural assets that, as a whole, represent a potential driving force for development and growth. Their value and impact become even more significant when considered as part of an *integrated cultural system* at territorial scale.

State protection, with recognition as a "historical centre", combined with Law No. 27/2018 "For Cultural Heritage and Museums"(*Për Trashëgiminë Kulturore dhe Muzetë*) which regulates the protection, conservation and management of Albanian historical centres (cf. Mitrojorgji, 2022), are an important premise for any hypothesis concerning the recovery and enhancement of the village. The recent restoration of the Church of St Mary and the *hajat* (2017) seems to be a tangible sign of the attention that Albanian public institutions are paying to Bënjë's cultural heritage.

Alongside these assets, the village has significant critical issues. From a place with a clear social profile described by Viktor Kola in his monograph *Bënja e Përmetit*, in a few decades it has turned into a place of dormant memories and broken histories. Today Bënjë is a village undergoing abandonment, inhabited by only a few dozen people, for the most part elderly. Services for people are lacking or absent. Most houses are abandoned and many are in need of urgent work to ensure their safety.

Due to the difficulties in reaching the village, despite its proximity to Përmet and important tourist attractions, it is isolated. It is not at all affected by the intense flow of visitors to the thermal area next to the Kadiu Bridge.

Apart from the road (*Rruga e Bënjës*), which is in a poor condition, there are other routes leading to the village, such as mule tracks and trails.

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

The most interesting of these routes for the possibilities it represents is the path that connects the thermal area to the village. The route unfolds in a beautiful landscape setting offering a variety of attractive views, crosses the Bënjë Stream just below the village thanks to the *Ura e Bënjës* and ultimately ends up at the Architectural Complex of St Mary.

This is the path on which the working group of the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, in agreement with the staff of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (AICS) in Tiranë, decided to intervene. On the other hand, Kola himself saw hope for the future of the village in its connection with the thermal area. «Let us not forget», he wrote, «that in the future this village may become a tourist destination for visitors to the Kadiu Bridge baths.»[1] (Kola, 2002: 85).

In the process of regenerating Bënjë, this project to promote 'slow' mobility is of strategic importance as it could result in a major tourist flow from the thermal area to the village in a short time, without altering the nature of the places and without requiring large amounts of funding.

The implementation of this project could, moreover, give rise to a series of activities to enhance the territory, strengthen the tourist offer and create direct and indirect job opportunities.[2] Examples of direct job opportunities include maintaining the path, its equipment and furnishings, working as a tour guide, and providing tourists with alternative means of transport for the hike, such as donkeys and horses. Indirect employment opportunities include all activities aimed at tourists who might reach the village via the path (e.g. sales, hospitality and catering activities).

In order to strengthen its impact, the project was integrated with the redevelopment of the external spaces of St Mary's Church, located at the entrance to the village. This way visitors would find a well-kept, well-equipped and scenic place at the end of the route, characterised by a valuable architectural complex surrounded by centuries-old cypress trees.

The project also includes the construction of an environmental culture and tourist reception centre with a shop selling typical local products (food and handicrafts). These activities could be hosted in the former village school.[3]

In conclusion, the proposed project involves three actions: (1) renovation of the path connecting the thermal area to the village (excluding the restoration and consolidation of the Bënjë Bridge, which requires in-depth planning and an *ad hoc* budget), (2) redevelopment of the area corresponding to the parvis of the Architectural Complex of St Mary, and lastly, (3) the functional renovation and conversion of the former village school into an environmental culture and tourist reception centre. At present, a project has only been developed for the first two of these actions.[4]

The route of the path and the architectural and landscape elements and features that characterise it are shown in the following Sections and in figures 3.1 and 3.2, while the external spaces of St Mary's Church are described in the Section 2.3.1.

[1] Translation from Albanian by the author.

[2] See Chapter 6 and Lauria *et al.* (2020).

[3] Note that this building (as well as the rest of the architectural complex) is the property of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and that any project must be agreed in advance with the Metropolia of Gjirokastër.

[4] A description of the planned work can be found in Chapter 4 of the book.

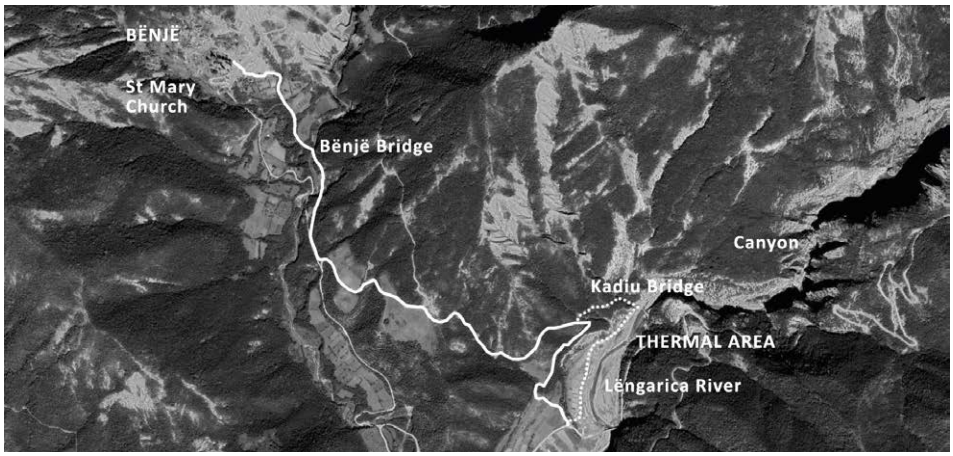


Figure 3.1 – The path from the thermal area to Bënjë.

Figure 3.2 – Some scenes along the path.

3.2 The landscape

Gabriele Paolinelli, Flavia Veronesi

3.2.1 General characteristics of the landscape

There are clear and noticeable variations in the landscape between the *Ura e Kadiut* and the village of Bënjë. The valley floor of the lower course of the Lëngarica River leads, by climbing up the right-hand slope, to a watershed plateau that separates the main valley from the tributary valley of the Bënjë Stream (see the relief profile in Fig. 3.3). The village is located further up in an elevated and sunny position. The morphology of the geographical features therefore includes areas of terrain with slight slopes and very steep surfaces.

The slopes of the right-hand side of the Lëngarica Valley are mostly covered with scrub vegetation with shrubs and small trees in fine soils, and frequent rocky outcrops, the latter showing widespread natural degradation due to the lithological type.

> «The soil is composed of very heterogeneous facies of flysch, with a prevailing presence of argillite, siltstone and sandstone, with layers of calcareous olistoliths […]. Given their geomorphological composition, the slopes that develop in a N-E direction are also subject to landslides, due to the intense surface erosion […]» (Bashkia Përmet, 2020, cit. in Lauria *et al.*, 2020: 67).

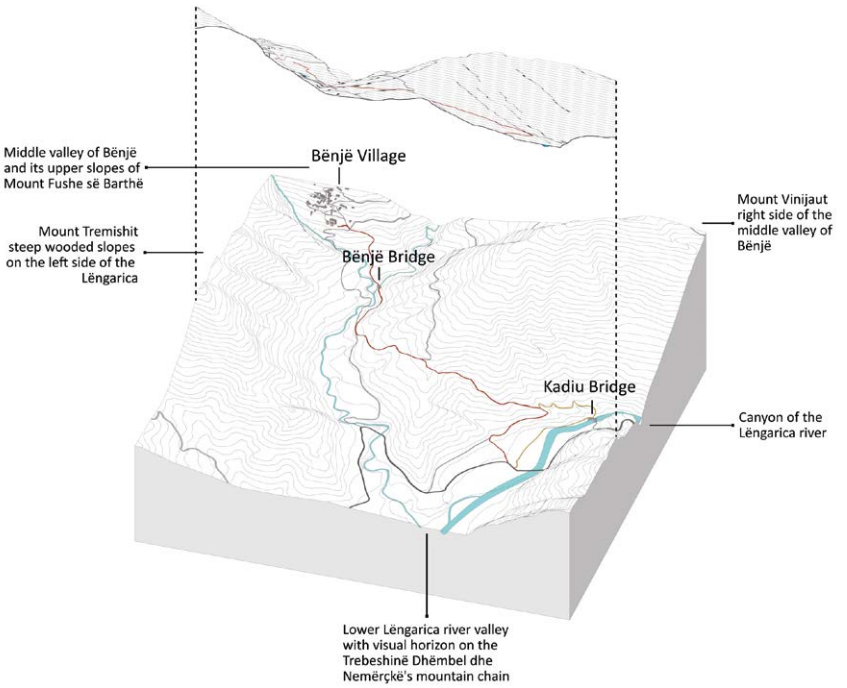
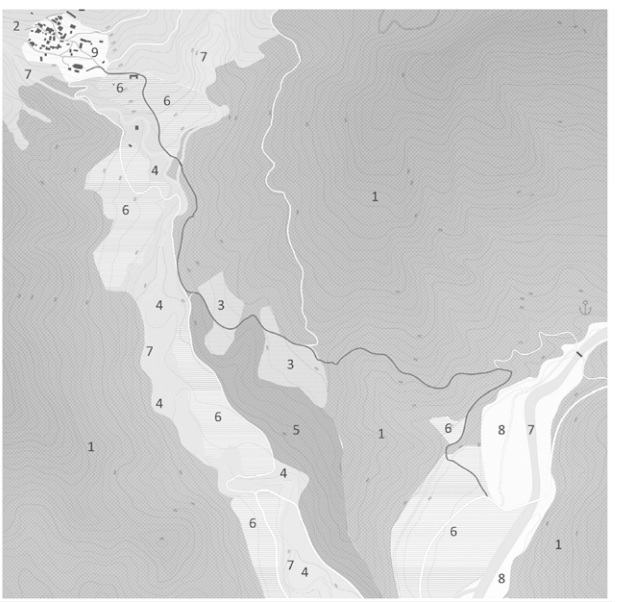


Figure 3.3 – General contextualisation of the path in relation to the morphology of the landscape.



LEGEND

1. Broad-leaved forests
2. Shrub and tree formations in evolution
3. Small bushes
4. Areas with agricultural crops and semi-natural plant formations
5. Olive groves
6. Arable land
7. Rivers and streams
8. Areas adjacent to the river
9. Settlements.

Figure 3.4 – Diversification of the landscape mosaic according to the main types of vegetation formations and land uses (expeditious processing on photo-interpretation).

Field observations and an analysis of the main types of topsoil conducted with the available data show a significant extension of forest formations dominated by broad-leaved trees [Fig. 3.4], both in the Lëngarica Valley and in the tributary valley of the Bënjë Stream. However, coniferous reforestations created in the 20th century are also widespread in the Përmet area (Lauria *et al*., 2020).

The left side of the main valley has low steep slopes, which when climbed lead to areas of gentler morphology at the top of the Lëngarica Canyon. The scenery is remarkable even from such positions, due to the unique proximity of the two sides owing to the small cross-section of the valley. However, the canyon is at its most dramatic from below, already some tens of metres upstream of the Ottoman bridge, due to the unique geological features that justified its recognition as a Natural Monument in 2002.[5] [see Figs. 1.58 and 2.3]

Agricultural crops characterise the landscape with important historical depth, although they are subordinate to forests in their extent. Despite the orographic conditions of low mountains and river valley bottoms, the climatic characteristics resulting from the latitude have also allowed for the cultivation of olive trees, in addition to vines, diversifying the landscape mosaic, along with fields growing other crops that have been intercropped over time.

3.2.2 Landscape characterisation of the path

An analysis of the path between the bridge and the village marked out six landscape identities specific to as many parts of the route. They include one or more sections, in continuity or variants, as identified in the diagram in Fig. 3.5. Some sections (1, 2, 3, 4, 4a, 4b, 5) are included in the design study illustrated in Chapter 4. The sections further downstream (0a and 0b) are not included in the study as they are part of the area that includes the Bënjë Thermal Baths, which are the focus of an enhancement project commissioned by the Albanian Development Fund to an Albanian design studio in 2019.[6] [Fig. 1.47]

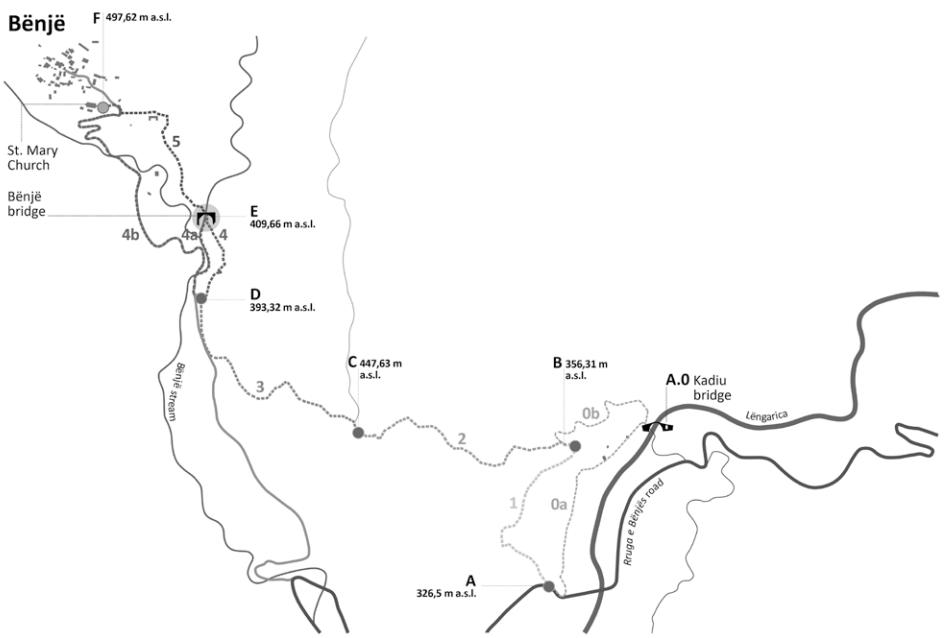


Figure 3.5 – Identification of the distinctive sections of the path.

[5] Republic of Albania, Council of Ministers Decree No. 676/2002.

[6] "Site Management, Interpretive, and Visitor Experience for the Bënja Thermal Waters Touristic Area" under the PIUTD Project. JV Abkons shpk and Metropolis shpk., 2019.

3.2.2.1 Section 0a

This portion of the route runs along the flat, from approximately 325 to 326 metres a.s.l., along the right bank of the Lëngarica River.

Downstream, the relationship with the ordinary road network is currently established with a mini roundabout which brings the site into line with urban and peri-urban road standards, although for the time being it is neither paved nor signposted. [Fig. 3.6] A similar consideration should be made with regard to the planting done in the area used as a parking site for campers and motor vehicles. In this case too, the adoption of a monospecific plant composition of oriental plane trees (*Platanus orientalis* L.) with regular alignments refers to urban standards, despite the species being local. The surfaces, lacking a suitable organisation for the frequent, albeit slow, transit of vehicles and their parking, had deteriorated only a few years after the project was carried out. The area, as mentioned, is due to be further transformed to enhance it for tourist-recreational activities. This project envisages its closure with regulated access, the provision of services in small architectural structures and the open spaces organised with parking spaces for cars and motor caravans paved in conglomerate.

Further up, past the Visitors Centre kiosks, [see Fig. 1.47] the section runs along the Lëngarica to the Kadiu Bridge, across which the thermal baths can be reached.

Figure 3.6 – The landscape in Section 0a of the path, near the roundabout providing access to the thermal area from the valley floor road.

3.2.2.2 Section 0b

Immediately after the bridge, the path climbs a very steep slope [Fig. 3.7] crossing the scrub vegetation from an altitude of around 325 m up to around 356 m a.s.l. offering impressive views of the bridge itself and over the Lëngarica Canyon.

The section is now almost impassable due to ongoing erosion and instability. Its direct relationship with the Ottoman bridge, however, gives it pre-eminent historical importance as part of the most likely connection between the villages on the left bank of the Lëngarica and the village of Bënjë.

As mentioned, Sections 0a and 0b are not part of the project proposal developed by the research team on behalf of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. They do however play an essential role as a direct connection between the path, the thermal area and the Visitors Centre of the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park.

Figure 3.7 – The landscape in Section 0b, where the path adapts to the marked steepness of the slope.

3.2.2.3 Section 1

Section 1 runs from the intersection with the valley floor road, at an elevation of approximately 326 m a.s.l., to the junction with Sections 0b and 2, at an elevation of approximately 356 m a.s.l.

The large section of the lower Lëngarica Valley offers expansive panoramic views, [Fig. 3.8] which also create appreciable scenic interest by closing the field of vision with the mountain range on the left side of the Vjosa Valley. The landscape is marked by meadows and crops on terraces and plateaus and forests on the higher and steeper slopes.

The under-utilisation of the meadows and the partial abandonment of cultivation and, in general, the low anthropic pressure, foster the growth of evolving spontaneous vegetation. Although it does not show stages of particular biological richness, it does offer striking diversification among the spaces visible from the path.

Figure 3.8 – In Section 1, shortly after the intersection with the valley floor road and a slight and short climb, the landscape morphology is gentle, with forest formations on the higher and steeper slopes and meadows and crops on the lower and less steep ones.

The path crosses scrub vegetation formations, which alter the visual fields, so the spatiality of the path is marked by alterations, from the vegetation margins of the highest formations to points with broad panoramic openings. The downward views generally feature plant formations in the foreground.

3.2.2.4 Section 2

From the lower elevation of about 356 m a.s.l, the section reaches 448 m a.s.l, the elevation of the watershed plateau between the main valley and the village valley.

The lower segment of the path has gentle inclines despite continuing on a steep slope. The layout has clear morphological congruity due to the slight divergence from the contour lines. The narrow section and prominent relationships with the vegetation formations of the scrubland connote and delimit the prevailing spatiality. However, there are episodic panoramic openings over the lower Lëngarica Valley and the main mountain range that determine the visual horizon on the hydrographic left of the Vjosa Valley. [Fig. 3.9]

Widespread juniper shrubs (*Juniperus communis L.*) stand out among the plants of outstanding natural and cultural interest.

In the upper segment of the section, the path slope is steeper and the bottom has widespread outcrops of the sedimentary rock substrate arranged in obvious inclined planes. Here, the geo-pedological features and their micro-environmental consequences in terms of summer temperatures and drainage, affect the development of the scrubland, which is sparse with limited plant growth.

Overall, this segment of the path is highly scenic due to the thinning vegetation, and its material-chromatic identity is down to the contrast between the aggregates on the surface and the plants.

The valley floor of the Lëngarica River, which is broadly visible, is characterised by the semi-natural morphology of the watercourse, the width of which refers to the different flows prior to the dike and reservoir built upstream for hydroelectric production. [see Fig. 1.55] Some alluvial terraces on the hydrographic right, historically characterised by agricultural cultivation, have been transformed at the end of the valley floor road by the recent arrangements to support the tourist-recreational use of the thermal area.

Figure 3.9 – In the upper segment of Section 2, the path is highly scenic and the views are therefore vulnerable to transformations and uses that alter the specific characteristics of the landscape.

3.2.2.5 Section 3

From the summit altitude of 448 m a.s.l., the path reaches approximately 393 m a.s.l. in the village valley. The first segment of this section in the direction of the village of Bënjë coincides with a watershed plateau between the right side of the Lëngarica Valley and the left side of the valley of the Bënjë Stream. The site has an emerging scenic value within the scope of the visual opportunities offered by the path along its length. Views of considerable interest intercept three distinct landscape areas: (1) the lower Lëngarica Valley, (2) the main valley of the Vjosa River with the Nemërçka Mountain Range, and (3) the middle Bënjë Valley with the perched village and its upper slopes. Despite the moderate acclivity, the soil is subject to erosion but its herbaceous formations partially protect it and provide the secondary grassland character typical of the area. Looking at Fig. 3.10, a secondary grassland can be seen in the foreground. In the intermediate plane deciduous forest formations dominated by broad-leaved trees found extensively in the valley of the Bënjë Stream emerge, while in the background, further up from the village of the same name, rocky detritus outcrops of areas subject to widespread erosion stand out.

Figure 3.10 – The landscape in the valley segment of Section 3, with the secondary grassland that characterises the watershed plateau between the Lëngarica River and Bënjë Stream valleys.

The path continues down into the Bënjë Valley on a rural road that appears to have no foundations or stabilisation in the plateau. It then continues along the left side of the valley of the Bënjë Stream, crossing the forest formations and cultivated fields. Here the road conditions are particularly comfortable in terms of gradient, surface and width, as it is currently a dirt road. [Fig. 3.11]

Figure 3.11 – The landscape in Section 3, with the dirt road connecting the village of Bënjë, visible in the background, to the main road in the Lëngarica valley floor.

For a short distance, the road is flanked by a secondary but highly scenic path leading to the area known as Gypsy Square (*Sheshi i Arixhinjve*) (see § 2.1.4).

3.2.2.6 Sections 4, 4a and 4b

The path continues up the slope, rising in altitude from around 393 metres a.s.l. to around 410 metres a.s.l. in the direction of the Ottoman bridge at Bënjë and the village of the same name on the left side of the stream, offering interesting views in this tributary valley. To reach the village, there are three route variants in which the path crosses the scree slope and the Ottoman bridge (Section 4), runs along the stream bed (Section 4a) and along the road (Section 4b). [Fig. 3.12]

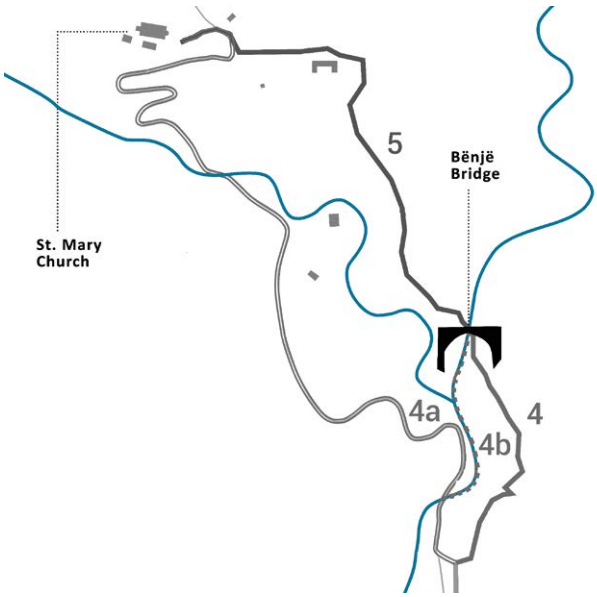


Figure 3.12 – Layout of the path in the three variants considered, across the scree slope and the Bënjë Bridge (Section 4), along the stream bed (Section 4a), and along the road (Section 4b). The first two variants merge into an uphill route that reaches the foot of the village of Bënjë (Section 5).

The walkability of Section 4 is influenced by an extensive and very steep scree formation: the passage on the hydrographic left has a segment of approximately 70 metres in length that is difficult and unsafe to cross. [see Fig. 3.22] This section is interesting, however, as it offers a view from above of the small, heavily incised valley and for its cultural significance as part of the original system that connected the villages via the bridge. [Figs. 3.13 and 3.14]

Alternatively, from the intersection of the vehicle road and the Bënjë Stream, the Ottoman bridge can be reached in summer by walking along the riverbed (Section 4a). This route allows a closer look at the lithological stratification outcropping on the lower slopes and offers unique views of the bridge, which, although it is now in a precarious state of preservation (see § 3.3), is a significant historical-architectural expression of the cultural value of the landscape. From the base of the bridge, a short, steep escarpment leads to the upper level, rejoining Section 4a to Section 4.

There is an easier connection between the village and the main valley, however, during the long periods when it is possible to wade across the stream via the dirt road (Section 4b). Here, the route is marked by a mosaic of topsoils with a significant presence of plants made up of large shrubs and trees, from the valley floor up to the slopes above the village of Bënjë. Climbing towards the summit of the path, the scenic appearance of both the village and the Nemërçka Mountain Range is particularly noticeable. On the other hand, in addition to hydrogeological instability, the scattered scree formations in the vicinity of the village create a visual disturbance given their proximity to outdoor life, both in public and private spaces.

Figure 3.13 – The landscape in Section 4 of the path, which diverges from the current dirt road to connect to the Ottoman bridge by travelling along a slope with scree formations.

Figure 3.14 – An example of the views offered by Section 4 upstream of the bridge, over the heavily carved valley through which the Bënjë Stream flows.

3.2.2.7 Section 5

In continuation of Sections 4 and 4a, from an elevation of approximately 410 metres a.s.l, the route continues as far as the village at an elevation of approximately 497 metres a.s.l, with a section on the hydrographic right of the Bënjë Stream, characterised by semi-natural forest formations with a predominance of deciduous broad-leaved trees. Slightly further up they border extensive areas where plant life has disappeared due to widespread soil erosion and the consequent emergence of evolving scree formations. [Fig. 3.15] The path has a pronounced slope with stretches of traditional cobblestones (*kalldrëm*) which are still quite recognisable, albeit deteriorating (see § 3.3). The section is also characterised by the gradual appearance of elements that testify to the human presence in the area, such as dry stone walls, small buildings and rural tree formations (see § 3.3). Close to the village, the visual field of the path opens up higher up due to the absence of forest vegetation as a result of the aforementioned soil erosion and the emergence of eroding scree slopes. In this final section of the path, the anthropogenic plant presence of cypress trees in the cemetery of St Mary's Architectural Complex is a significant landscape landmark (see Chapter 2).

Figure 3.15 – The landscape in Section 5 of the path, in the vicinity of St Mary's Architectural Complex, on the side of the village most affected by the spread of rocky detritus outcrops and its degraded appearance.

3.3 Necessary constructions as a landscape paradigm

Pietro Matracchi

3.3.1 Introduction

The depopulation of rural areas places the focus on certain macro-phenomena, such as the abandonment of built-up areas, villages and isolated houses, and once cultivated fields, once again engulfed by the spontaneous and uncontrolled growth of vegetation. The human actions that on a daily basis shaped, maintained and made this environment liveable were neglected. These were small actions that fostered the cultivation of fields often created in impervious contexts: retaining works, systems to control surface water run-off, and the skilful placement of plants that at the same time generated stability in the soil. In the network of road connections, whose destiny is linked to the

inhabitation of places, the dense paths that criss-crossed the territory are even more in the background, almost to the point of being forgotten. In reality, this placement of paths in the shadows is the result of small alterations to the natural environment, by virtue of thorough knowledge of the orography, surface geology and vegetation. The extent to which these now almost lost routes were used and their relevance is sometimes evidenced in specific works such as stone bridges, which now appear as powerful and unexpected infrastructures.

This is the case of the path that, starting from the village of Bënjë, crosses a cultivated area and the bridge of the same name, and continues for a long stretch through a wooded area until reaching the Kadiu Bridge over the Lëngarica River, where it continued in the direction of the Shqeria and Kolonjës regions (Lauria *et al.*, 2020).

The support works for rural activities and pathways appear to be extremely fragile, a condition almost consubstantial to them. They represent the *necessary construction*, consistent with the goals to be pursued, based on daily presence and care, in a virtuous relationship with the environment. One can imagine a sense of community in populations that ensured significant, responsible and continuous work, guaranteeing a balance between the organisation of the agricultural landscape and respect for places, also thanks to the persistence of knowledge that was handed down from generation to generation. In a situation where everything occurred on the margin of subsistence, actions fostered by simple but pervasive gestures were carried out to maintain plots of land suitable for cultivation or pastoral activities, with an awareness of the specific nature of the contexts whose relevance should not escape us today, in the face of recurring catastrophic events caused by the hydrogeological instability of the territory.

The importance of the footpath network in the past, as an alternative to a major road network, is also inferred from a report written in 1922 by the economist Albert Calmés, sent by the League of Nations following the Albanian government's request for suggestions for the country's development. In a passage on the road network in Albania, Calmés observed:

> «Albania is a state politically, but not economically. Rather, it is an incongruous collection of economic districts and local markets more isolated from each other than they could be from official borders. The only way to reach Shkodër in winter is by sea. There are no direct roads from Tirana to the south of the country or to Korça. From Durres to Vlora you have to go by sea: and so on […] the economic consequences of the total lack of infrastructure are no less serious. Shkodër exports surplus leather to Italy and Gjirokastër has to go to Italy to buy it. For olive oil, the situation is reversed: Vlorë exports oil to Italy and Shkodër re-imports it to Albania. The reason is that these districts have some communication with Italy, but none with each other […]» (cited by Halimi, 2013: 95-96).

The Albanian territory posed particular difficulties due to its characteristics: 70% of it is mountainous, and the large coastal plains (Myzeqe and Zadrima) were marshy for long periods of the year. So, pastoralism became a particularly popular activity, benefiting from pastures covering 25-30% of the territory. Calmés denounced the limitations and underdevelopment of the cultivation systems, compared to the 9% of the country's surface area available for agricultural purposes, which involved 90% of the population (cited by Halimi, 2013). Moreover, agricultural land was largely in the hands of landowners: the most fertile area of Albania, between Durrës and Vlorë, was owned by just 165 families (Caselli & Thoma, 2000).

The agrarian land registry, introduced only in 1928, and the concomitant start of the agrarian reform that led to the overcoming of landownership, did not reach a solution due to the excessive fragmentation of the land, most of which consisted of 2 ha properties (Caselli & Thoma, 2000). This condition continued even after the Second World War,

in the years of Enver Hoxha, when land became state property, with agriculture largely entrusted to cooperatives. Faced with the difficulty of modernising agriculture and, in general, the rural extent of the country, it was difficult for a large part of the population to overcome production that went beyond self-consumption by the family or internal consumption within the country's borders (Tachella, 2006; Caselli & Thoma, 2000). The area in which the village of Bënjë is located did not escape these severe conditions.

3.3.2 The route of the path

The village of Bënjë and the Kadiu Bridge represent the two poles of a path, part of a widespread network of links that branch off into the territory. Precise traces and stretches remain of this network, while much has been lost due to the combined effect of the abandonment of the most deprived areas and choices that have concentrated mobility on a few main road backbones. This change has taken place relatively recently in contexts such as Bënjë. However, it is still easy to imagine how important the path system had been for the sharing of social and economic relations in rural communities living in a harsh environment, little suited to major innovations in how the fields are organised or new crops are introduced. In this context it is difficult to imagine in the even more distant past a rural feat that could produce wealth and, at the same time, reshape the landscape, with processes comparable to those highlighted by Sereni's precursor volume (1961) on the Italian agrarian landscape, or by recent research (Fiore *et al.*, 2021) highlighting the initiatives of the communities in the Middle Ages to develop the road system.

The positioning of the Kadiu Bridge in relation to the particular orography of the Lëngarica River's route was not accidental. The bridge is preceded by a long gorge that snakes between high cliffs. Right on the last sloping offshoot of the rocks that cling to the riverbed, the abutments supporting the arch of the bridge found a powerful foothold, which are preceded by rock outcrops that help mitigate the impetuosity of floods [Fig. 3.16]. The change in orography before and after the bridge is evidenced by the sudden reduction in the steepness of the slopes at the river's edge. Beyond the bridge, the valley floor widens considerably, leaving more space for the Lëngarica riverbed and the gradual extension of the fields. [Fig. 3.17]

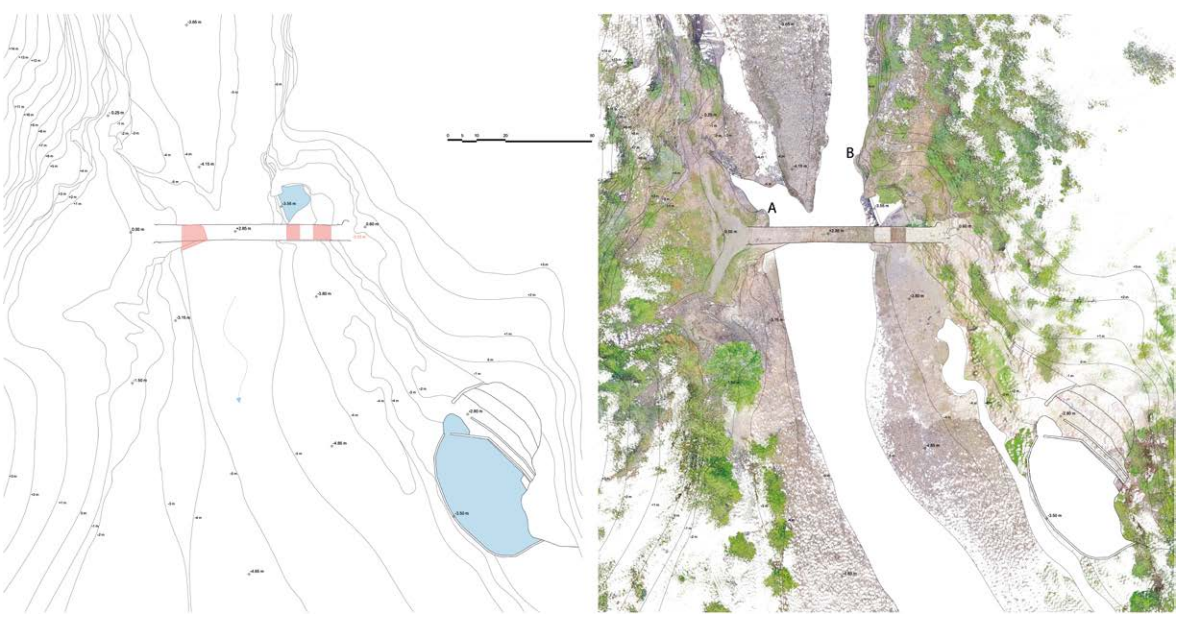


Figure 3.16 – *Left*. Plan of the Kadiu Bridge highlighting the piers (in orange), the contour lines of the area, and the thermal pools (in light blue). *Right*, plan view of the point cloud of the laser scanner survey, indicating the rock outcrops (A and B) protecting the bridge abutments.

Figure 3.17 – Orographic context of the Lëngarica River upstream *(left)* and downstream *(right)* of the Kadiu Bridge.

The relevance of the bridge area is also linked to some caves that testify to human presence in times necessarily much earlier than the construction of the bridge, dating back to the period between the 18th and 19th centuries during the reign of Ali Pasha of Ioànnina (Shtylla, 2013; Lauria *et al.*, 2020). [Fig. 3.18] The presence of thermal waters that could have had a religious or curative value may also have been considered when deciding the location of such rock dwellings (Melillo, 1995). The specific location of the bridge can therefore be explained by several factors, with the orography of the context seemingly the most significant.

Figure 3.18 – The Bënjë Cave, on the right side of the river, with the Kadiu Bridge in the background.

Figure 3.19 – Thermal pool on the edge of the Kadiu Bridge.

From a more general point of view, according to Kola (2002) the thermal baths, together with the Kadiu Bridge, constitute a strategic junction because several roads connecting two large provinces intersect here [Fig. 3.19]. They served as a permanent guidepost. «In fact, one of the first military trigonometric points was built on the highest hill to the north-east of the village (*Kryqëzë*), which also served as a stationary landmark» (Kola, 2002: 10).[7]

From the Kadiu Bridge, the path towards Bënjë continues to climb until, having overcome a difference in height of approximately 100 metres from the bridge,[8] it does not go beyond the hilly promontory between the confluent valleys of the Lëngarica River and the Bënjë Stream. In this short portion of the path, neglect of the land has already led to the almost obliteration of an initial section. The interruption, which was not accidental, is in a compluvial area between rather steep slopes, where a torrent forms when there is heavy rainfall, as evidenced by the area devoid of vegetation due to intense erosion by water runoff. On the same site, the disordered accumulation of slabstones would suggest the remains of a walled construction connecting the two slopes, dismantled by the impetuosity of the waters, which likely became more forceful when use of the path became increasingly sporadic, until it was completely abandoned. [Fig. 3.20]

Figure 3.20 – Compluvial area between slopes where the path that led to the Kadiu Bridge is interrupted.

[7] Author's translation from Albanian.

[8] For the morphological aspects of the area and the route of the path, see § 3.2.

Beyond the promontory, the physiognomy of the village of Bënjë can be seen in the distance, set against the mountain. The path continues to descend and its route is not always clear, also due to the construction of new dirt roads. In any case, it had to reach the bridge over the Bënjë Stream (*Ura e Bënjës*). Here, too, the archway, although its span is much smaller than that of the Kadiu Bridge, stands on rocky ridges that are very high above the stream bed. [Fig. 3.21] The ability to take advantage of the geological features of the ground can be fully grasped in the fact that an abutment dismantled by flood waves did not cause the collapse of the bridge, which benefits from the substantial support provided by the rock itself. This in any case triggers instability in the masonry, which we will return to later. The choice of the bridge's location must have been considered so important by the builders that, in order to reach it from the left side of the stream, a section of path had to be built on a slope with widespread superficial gravitational instabilities related to erosive processes of water runoff.

Just upstream of this crossing rises an excavated rock face with thin sandstone layers alternating with silty-clayey marl layers with extensive, highly fractured flakes. [Fig. 3.22] This is probably a quarry face, rather than a slope cut for the path to pass through it. In fact, the thin layers of compact sandstone were most likely used to construct the adjacent bridge. The choice of such a position for the bridge was also due to the fact that creating a passage a little further downstream, where the compluvial area between the slopes widens, would have required the construction of a bridge with a much more imposing and therefore much more costly arch.

Figure 3.21 – Bënjë Bridge.

Figure 3.22 – Rock face near Bënjë Bridge.

After crossing the Bënjë Stream, the village is reached by following a rather short but steep section of the path, with a challenging change in height of more than eighty metres, which initially runs orthogonally to the contour lines, unlike the previous part which tends to cut diagonally across them, mitigating the steepness. The orography of the slope means that as one ascends from the bridge, only in the final stretch does one first glimpse the cypress trees marking the Church of St Mary and the adjacent cemetery, then the apsidal building and the village of Bënjë, now only a few dozen metres away. [Fig. 3.23]

The section of the path between the bridge and the village also has the distinctive trait of crossing a cultivated area organised into fields delimited by wooded borders. [Fig. 3.24] These mostly follow the contour lines and form a kind of extensive tree line that stabilises the soil in cultivated areas and slows down the runoff of surface water, thereby safeguarding the cultivated land, which is made regular and only slightly sloped. The tree-lined borders seem at times to be the remnants of a wooded area, part of which survives on one side of the path, where, by means of a kind of targeted deforestation, fields have been carved out of an area considered fertile. Not by chance, this area is close to a source of water, namely the presence of two streams on the slopes of the village side (the Oskrusheve and the Bënjë), which then join into a single stream that is a tributary of the Lëngarica.

The path that climbs up from the stream for an initial stretch is between the cultivated area and the wooded area; it is then flanked on both sides by fields, while in the upper part the vegetation completely disappears due to extensive rock outcrops with fragmentary sandstone and particularly fine materials. [Fig. 3.25]

Figure 3.23 – To the right of the monumental cypresses, the last section of the path crosses the bare slope and reaches the Church of St Mary and the village of Bënjë.

Figure 3.24 – View of the cultivated area on the slope down from the Church of St Mary showing the Bënjë Bridge (1) and the last section of the path before reaching the church (2).

Figure 3.25 – Cypress trees at the end of the path mark the proximity of the village of Bënjë.

3.3.3 Structures along the path

For long stretches, the path seems to be marked merely by the removal of the sparse vegetation that manages to grow in areas of rocky outcrops or that are covered by a very thin layer of soil, removed by the continuous passage of people and animals. This was enough to create a sort of natural cobblestone and should not be considered a coincidence, but the result of profound knowledge of the places and of the ability to grasp their virtues and vocations, avoiding modifications, when possible, that would prove onerous and not very long-lasting or effective over time. In some sections, the route is orthogonal to the sandstone formation layers, which thereby create a system of natural steps, albeit uneven and irregular, that make it easier to walk along. [Fig. 3.26] This characteristic has ensured that the path has lasted over time, making it still legible for long stretches today despite its enduring non-use. In addition, it is likely that only small connection works were carried out at the most difficult points, as the small messy accumulations of slabs that are sometimes encountered would seem to indicate. Where the vegetation thickens, the path becomes a dirt track, at times almost indistinguishable among the spontaneous forest regrowth, no longer obstructed by the regular passage of people and animals.

Figure 3.26 – Outcrops of rock and erratic boulders on the path.

The layout was dictated by the orographic conformation, the steepness and the surface characteristics of the soil. In some sections, the path was defined with barely perceptible incisions in the rocky slope, without adding any constructive action. Near the church, in addition to the modest cutting of the ground, on the downstream side there is a band of slabstone, supported by dry-laid stones. [Fig. 3.27] As evidenced by the lithological characteristics of the context, the slabs and stones were found in the very place where the material was used. Greater difficulties were posed by the location of a stretch of the path, close to the Bënjë Bridge, where one has to cross a slope characterised by silty-clayey marl layers with highly fractured flakes, on a considerable slope, and affected by surface instability. Today, almost all traces of this ancient passageway, which must have required frequent maintenance, have been lost. A masonry

relic survives in the original position of the path and there is a further small portion of wall slightly downstream and blocked by a shrub. These traces show that the pathway here consisted of drystone masonry, which rose from the outer face resting on a narrow levelled strip. From the foot of the facing, a masonry wall with a mostly triangular cross-section rose up, gradually filling in the area between the facing and the slope profile with rubble; the top walking surface was finished off with slabstone, which still exists among the surviving wall fragments. [Fig. 3.28]

Figure 3.27 – Traces of the paving of the path near the village.

Figure 3.28 – Surviving wall fragments of the path section on the left side of the Bënjë Bridge.

Climbing up from the bridge towards Bënjë, for a long stretch the path is paved in *kalldrëm* and its width almost suggests it was a road. This is probably because it crosses a cultivated area close to the village. A great deal of attention was paid to the organisation of rural activities and the community's management of grazing areas, thereby allowing the stables to be located outside the town centre (see § 2.1.4).

Nowadays, the path is almost completely screened on the sides by trees and bushes, concealing its close relationship with the adjacent terraced cultivations. [Fig. 3.29] The path is wedged into the ground at times like a slight crevice. In some places one of its edges borders steep slopes, whereas in others it is flanked by portions of masonry of different widths, made necessary by the adjacent terracing. [Fig. 3.30]

Figure 3.29 – Cultivated fields on the edge of the path.

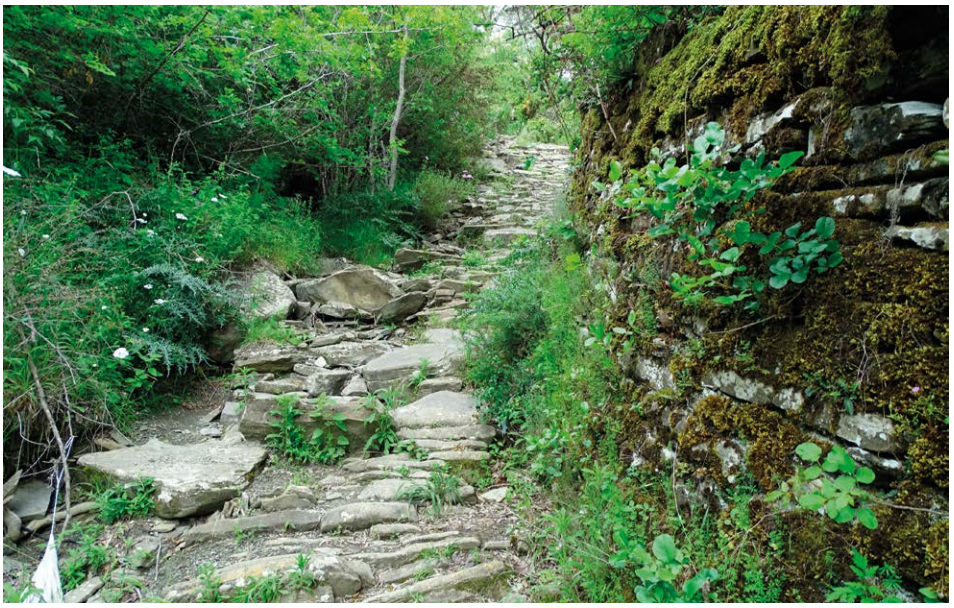


Figure 3.30 – The *kalldrëm* paved path crosses terraced fields supported by drystone walls.

Figure 3.31 – Details of the laying of the *kalldrëm*.

The *kalldrëm* consists of slabs laid with the thinner edge exposed, filled with earth or minute fragments of rock. [Fig. 3.31] The rows tend to be transverse, but rarely continuous over the entire width of the path. The irregularities are due to the fact that there was a tendency to accommodate the unevenness of the ground, corrected in part by the use of slabs of different sizes, sometimes laid on small volumes of soil that uniform the surface. The pattern of the slabs frequently adapts to the rocky outcrops, the top of which becomes part of the walking surface, in some cases after having been levelled. At the same time, the outcrops are particularly strong points of adhesion to which the slab can connect. More rarely, large-format slabs arranged as continuous transverse planking are used. Sometimes such slabs are used to create connecting steps between parts of the walking surface with significant height differences.

The overall stability of the paving is ensured by the deep insertion of the slabs and the lateral confinement, achieved with walls, or with the ground surface slightly raised at the edges. When the ground tends to slope at the side of the path, the *kalldrëm* is blocked with an edge made of massive polygonal slabs. [Fig. 3.32] The use of large slabs in the remaining parts appears to be episodic. Despite the humble means employed, attention to detail is evident even in the care taken in the gaps between the path and the fields: despite the small differences in height between the two parts, even here there is no lack of stone elements alongside the paving stone.

Stone materials similar to those used in the construction of the *kalldrëm* were used in the drystone retaining walls bordering the path. The distinguishing feature of the latter is the choice of a facing with larger ashlars, more suitable for providing stability with respect to the thrust of the terracing ground. The stone rows tend to maintain their horizontality but are irregular due to the continuous variation in height of the stone used. However, the wall system is extremely compact due to the skilful connection between the heterogeneous stone elements, in addition to which there was likely drainage on the inner side of the facing. Proof of this is the absence of collapses and alterations limited to the inevitable presence of biological colonization.

As further confirmation of the symbiosis between materials, environment and measured construction actions, a rural building bordering the last section of the path towards the village has a slabstone roof whose pattern is in continuity with the same type of slabstone dispersed on the adjacent slope. [Fig. 3.33]

Figure 3.32 – Section in *kalldrëm* with the edges blocked by large slabs.

Figure 3.33 – Roofing of a building made of the same slabstone used for the path.

3.3.4 The bridges

The Kadiu Bridge and the Bënjë Bridge are monumental works that in the present context almost seem to be semblances of a vanished world, no longer part of a system of connections or a living context. These structures testify to the importance of paths, as a system of widespread connections in the territory, which ensured that they were passable even at times when the water level of the streams and rivers rose, preventing or making fording difficult. Today, the Bënjë Bridge is in fact a neglected structure that has been severely damaged as a result of its state of abandonment. [Figs. 3.34] Despite the loss of masonry on the left abutment due to flooding, it has not yet undergone urgent restoration work that can no longer be put off.

The fate of the Kadiu Bridge was different due to its monumental size and its particular location close to the entrance to the canyon of the Lëngarica River; no less important is its function as a connection to the adjacent thermal baths on the left bank, which in recent years have become a destination for an increasing number of tourists. During the *Albania dei Piccoli Borghi* Thematic Workshop,[9] held in May and June 2019, it was possible to appreciate the temporary continuity in the use of the bridge with traditional activities, when it was crossed by a compact and numerous flock of sheep stretching from one bank to the other. [Fig. 3.25]

Figure 3.34 – Detail of the arch of Bënjë Bridge.

Figure 3.35 – The Kadiu Bridge crossed by a flock.

[9] Promoted by the Department of Architecture, University of Florence, coordinator Antonio Lauria (see Lauria *et al.*, 2020).

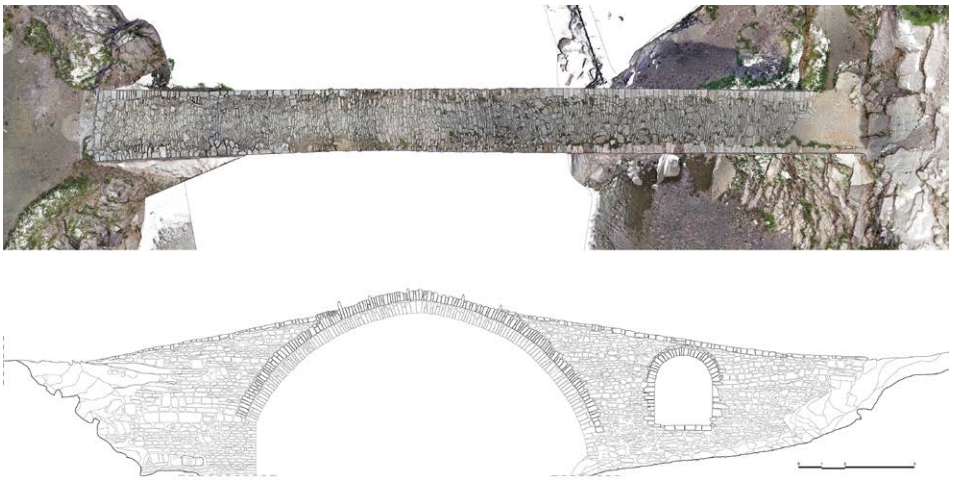


Figure 3.36 – Kadiu Bridge. *Above*. Photogrammetry of the plan representing the walkway. *Bottom*. Downstream elevation.

Figure 3.37 – Abutment of the Kadiu Bridge and thermal pool, detail of the archway springer and the side archway.

The characteristics of the Kadiu Bridge piers reflect the deliberate adaptation to the orography of the context. The one on the right rises up from the riverbed with a particularly irregular planimetric arrangement, due in particular to the downstream slanted side that widens, in two misaligned sections, to encompass part of the high ridge of supporting rock. [Fig. 3.16] In addition, the wall underneath the bridge arch, in turn, has been significantly rotated, increasing the span on the upstream side, thereby accommodating the outflow of water. Due to this slanted position of the inner side of the pier, the bridge arch has an upstream span of 15.10 m, which is reduced by approximately 0.80 m on the opposite. [Fig. 3.36] The more gradual steepness of the left bank of the river made it possible to set the pier on a footing on the rock, which for long periods of the year is above the water level. The bridge then continues, with a constant width, resting on the prominent rock, which gradually reduces the height of the wall mass. This section, more extensive than the other side, has an arch for releasing water pressure so that pressure on the flank is reduced in the event of major flooding, which generates a small water collection basin in this part. [Fig. 3.37]

The arch of the bridge has edges delimited by square stone ashlars, usually extending the full height of the stone archivolt which is approximately 50 cm. In the intrados of the barrel vault, in the internal parts, on the other hand, the use of smaller stones in a considerable variety of sizes can be seen, sometimes laid with a certain approximation. [Fig. 3.38] Adequate toothing between such inhomogeneous parts was achieved by using rather large ashlars on the intrados, sometimes exceeding the height of the stone archivolt itself. Given this constructional arrangement, it is reasonable to assume that the thickness of the barrel vault is reduced in the inner part between the edge arches.

At about half the height of the stone archivolts, small eyelets of metal ties, which do not always have an anchor bar, emerge from the mortar joints, comparable to those observed in the ties of the pronaos of the Church of St Mary. The position of the ties indicates that they were put in place when the bridge arch was under construction. Aside from the fact that there were not many anchor bars, the small size of the existing ones should be emphasised, from which it can be deduced that friction between the bars and the masonry of the vault was relied upon in order to reduce the risk of the formation of cracks parallel to the directrix, i.e. the side arches.

Figure 3.38 – Kadiu Bridge, details of the stone archivolts.

In some areas of the bridge intrados, the presence of smoothed overflow mortar can be seen, due to the use of the timber covering of the centring set up in the construction of the vault. The same stone archivolts of the bridge arch serve as the centring of a further arch, overhanging by around 10 cm and featuring ashlars in the central area that continue for a stretch beyond the top of the bridge. This device was designed to create a protection at the edges of the bridge, which was likely connected with a thin lateral wall, which has since been lost, as the similar bridges (both with overlapping stone ar-

chivolts) of Kamare (1715) in Librazhd (in Elbasan County), with evident remains of walls on the sides, and Mes (1768) near Shkodër, featuring protective walls, seem to prove (Maiellaro, 2006). [Fig. 3.39]

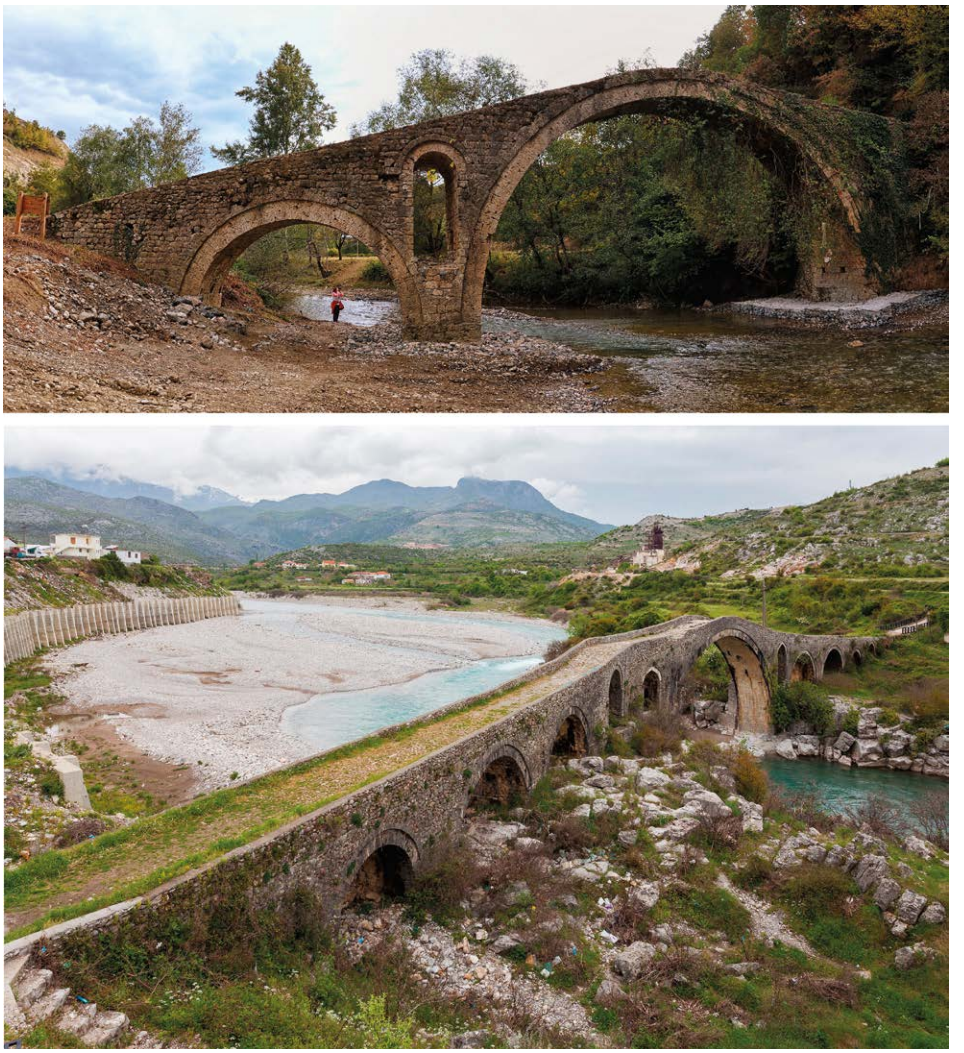


Figure 3.39 – *Above*. Goliku Bridge. *Bottom*. Mes Bridge.

For a large central section of the bridge, the floor slab is included in the thickness of the second arch. Considering that this arch is of modest thickness (just over 30 cm) and that the slab must have a certain depth, there would be too little residual thickness for a possible further barrel vault. It seems more likely, therefore, that the upper arch did not extend beyond the visible stone archivolt and was intended to create the architectural theme of the recessed arch, while at the same time providing a reliable anchorage for the ashlars extending beyond the walking level. Also in the side arch of the left abutment of the bridge, the crowning arch has a slight recess and an overposed moulding finish.

Bridges with archways designed by two adjoining arches, of which the upper one is slightly projecting, are a distinctive feature of several bridges. For instance, in addition to those already mentioned in Kamare and Mes, the Goliku Bridge (first half of the 18th century) in Pogradec can also be mentioned (Maiellaro, 2006).

Information on the restoration of the Kadiu Bridge is limited to more recent years (Lauria *et al.*, 2020). The right pier, probably also due to its position in the riverbed always below the water level, suffered a collapse in the masonry on the downstream side, which was rebuilt in 1982. On the other hand, hydrogeological conditions are considered one of the primary factors of bridge damage in Albania (Gega & Bozo, 2017). Nowadays, the Kadiu Bridge is in an overall good state of preservation; recent work involving the pointing of parts of the wall facing and the complete resurfacing of the paving can be seen. Such works are not always appropriate in the choice of materials and quality of execution. One problem that is certainly open is the safe use of the bridge, as it does not have side guards.

Figure 3.40 – Bënjë Bridge, the stone archivolts and the intrados.

Figure 3.41 – Bënjë Bridge, the masonry joined by vertical stone elements, connected to a section of wall on overhanging slabs.

Bënjë Bridge is modest in size, but it has similar characteristics to the Kadiu Bridge in that it has a pointed arch with a double stone archivolt, with the upper one slightly projecting. Differences can be seen in the size of the ashlars of the main arch, which here have thicknesses that decrease from the haunches to the most central area of the arch, where a kind of slab is used that is in continuity with that of the remaining part of the barrel vault. [Fig. 3.40]

A further similarity is due to the upper arch, which also uses some longer stone elements; here they are also inserted into a section of masonry delimiting the sides of the bridge. But Bënjë Bridge provides a further important piece of information. In the section of masonry to the side of the archway, the use of vertical stone elements juxtaposed with a horizontal row masonry continues. [Fig. 3.41] When it comes close to the slope, the masonry continues with an overhanging slab. In fact, with this device, the short section of the connecting wall (to the left of the stream) between the bridge and the slope was built as an overhang on the rock escarpment, dem-

onstrating the incumbency of the slope in the passage area and the desire not to alter it with excavations, however modest. Nowadays, these wall sections are surmounted by a ground crossing, with a walking surface for the most part horizontal. [Fig. 3.42]

Figure 3.42 – Walkway over the Bënjë Bridge.

This highlights a twofold difference with the similar bridges mentioned above: the lack of a paving slab and a humpbacked conformation. Taking into account the distinct features observed in the bridge's masonry, it could be assumed that the paving slab and the prominent passage were obliterated by the accumulation of soil that over time poured into the bridge passage from the looming slopes, characterised by unsta-

ble surface materials. Indeed, the masonry interpenetrated by vertical or sub-vertical stone elements would suggest the existence of a parapet up to the vicinity of the central area of the bridge, which would be configured as the top of a humpbacked path. This doubt could be clarified by minor excavation sampling to be carried out in the vicinity of the walls incorporating the vertical stone elements.

The left side of the bridge arch, placed up against a vertical, heavily stratified rock face, fell on a narrow abutment now completely demolished by floods. The modest thickness of the masonry abutment must have favoured this outcome; the prevailing part of the bridge abutment consisting of rock, however, has conferred stability to the arch to date [Fig. 3.43]. Due to the slight overhang in relation to the rock below, a corbel-like arrangement was created at the base of the arch, which partly compensated for the lack of an abutment. In such a condition of obvious vulnerability, the gradual disintegration of the masonry beyond the support of the arch is in any case occurring, which on the upstream side has already affected a section of the stone archivolt of the arch and the masonry of the side. This makes it all the more urgent to restore the missing parts, ensuring that the pillar to be rebuilt, being of modest masonry mass, has the appropriate anchorage with the adjacent rock wall, which was not provided for in the original structure characterised by this probable genetic factor of structural weakness.

Figure 3.43 – Details of the left abutment of the Bënjë Bridge.

3.3.5 The approach to the construction of the path and a lost features of the bridges

Retracing the path between the Kadiu Bridge and the village of Bënjë through the material remains of the small gestures that guided its construction and the choice of route testifies to the use of the environment with an approach that was aware of the strength and fragility of the contexts. Proof of this can be seen in the fortunate position of the bridges placed where the orographic and geological conditions guaranteed natural and reliable abutments supported on rock, partly concealed by wall coverings. It can also be seen in the ability to accompany the path with contained construction or modification actions, often limited to barely perceptible incisions in the ground, thanks to the identification of carefully chosen routes that also reduced the maintenance re-

quirements. It was also inevitable that areas with an unstable surface would be crossed, such as in the vicinity of Bënjë Bridge, where a short section of the path is built with a modest drainage wall, made of dry-stone, avoiding inserting it by excavating the slope, which is particularly steep. Measured soil changes affected the area on the slopes of the village, terraced and crossed by the path, which also provided access to the crops.

With regard to Bënjë Bridge, the possibility has emerged that soil gradually accumulated on the route. If this is confirmed after appropriate inspections, the original conformation of the humpback bridge, with part of the side walls, could be brought to light. All this would simplify the solution of ensuring the safe crossing of the bridge.

Recent restorations to the Kadiu Bridge have extended the slab of the walkway up to the edges of the bridge without taking into account the original arrangement delimited by masonry, elements that today need to be reconsidered and supplemented with additional devices to address the problem of lateral protection here as well.

The rational choice of where to take action and the minimal subtraction and addition of material seem to be constantly pursued intentions. The arrival area from the path towards the village seems to deviate from this approach to some extent. It is affected by extensive excavations bordered by a long retaining wall, where the area for the construction of the Architectural Complex of St Mary was created. Behind the apse, a large space continues, an important meeting place for the community of Bënjë,[10] which appears to have been deliberately made rough and with evident and irregular steepness, without going beyond what was deemed necessary.

[10] See § 2.3.1.

PART II. RESULTS

CHAPTER 4

The project proposal

Abstract: This chapter describes a project research experience that aspires to activate sustainable and socially inclusive development processes in the village of Bënjë. The research was carried out at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence within the framework of the "Develop Community Resources through the Enhancement of the Natural and Cultural Heritage" service contract signed with the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Tiranë office. After an introductory paragraph describing the project strategy and the knowledge and operational tools used (§ 4.1), the chapter is divided into two sections. The first illustrates the preliminary design of the path connecting the thermal area near Kadiu Bridge to the village of Bënjë. The second section describes the design interventions aimed at redeveloping the landing point of the path: the outdoor spaces of St Mary's Architectural Complex and, in particular, the eastern part of the parvis. Taken as a whole, the project represents a pilot initiative and is intended to represent a replicable model for the tourist enhancement of rural areas of scenic and architectural value, following sustainability criteria.

4.1 The design strategy

Antonio Laurìa

4.1.1 Introduction

As mentioned in § 3.1, among the various possible initiatives (see Laurìa *et al.*, 2020) aimed at initiating a sustainable and socially inclusive regeneration process in the village of Bënjë, the redevelopment of the path that leads from the thermal area next to Kadiu Bridge to St Mary's Architectural Complex was selected as a pilot project.

This choice resulted from the application of a number of selection criteria. Some of them concern the Feasibility (A) of the project itself and derive from the fulfilment or otherwise (yes/no) of the conditions established in the Service Contract[1] that gave rise to the research reported in this book, such as (1) the objectives to be achieved, (2) the available economic resources, and (3) the timeframe for the achievement of the initiative. Initiatives that did not meet all three feasibility criteria were excluded from the evaluation. The remaining initiatives were assessed against three other selection criteria – Social Impact (B.1); Tourism Enhancement (B.2); Effectiveness (B.3) – using a weighted analysis (low=1; medium=2; high=3). For the definition of the selection criteria, see Tab. 4.1.

The chosen theme incorporates several cognitive dimensions: history, territory, landscape, technology, conservation. This explains the variety of skills within the working

[1] Contract No. 19.378 dated 06.07.2021 between the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence.

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

group of the Department of Architecture (DIDA), Florence Accessibility Lab Research Unit, of the University of Florence.

> Antonio Laurìa, the principal investigator of research, is a full professor of technological and environmental design of architecture; Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi and Gabriele Paolinelli are associate professors, respectively, of territorial and urban planning, architectural restoration and landscape architecture. These professors were joined by two young researchers – Mirko Romagnoli, with expertise in environmental design, and Flavia Veronesi, with expertise in landscape design – and Fabrizio Battisti, associate professor of appraisal and valuation.

The working group jointly defined the intervention methodology and project guidelines. Mirko Romagnoli and Flavia Veronesi were assigned the drafting of the preliminary design while the economic evaluation of the project was carried out by Fabrizio Battisti.

The working group also drew on the expertise of local figures such as Daniel Pirushi, former manager of the *Instituti Kombëtari Trashëgimisë Kulturore* - IKTK, Tiranë and Dritan Kapo, an architect in Tiranë. Staff of the non-profit organisation CESVI stationed in Përmet – Giorgio Ponti, Julian Elezi, Ardian Gogo, Fiorent Jace, Jonid Jace, Aleks Tane and Elidjon Thanasi – made an important contribution to the fieldwork as did Berijan Premto and Sotir Nauni.

In Florence, the research took place in periodic working sessions at the headquarters of the Interdepartmental Research Unit Florence Accessibility Lab (Palazzo Vegni, Via San Niccolò, 93); part of the processing of the fieldwork in Albania took place at the Multifunctional Centre in Përmet.

Table 4.1 - Select criteria to choose the regeneration initiative and their meaning.

A. FEASIBILITY	Shows the possibility of implementing regeneration initiatives in accordance with the purpose of the service contract, the available economic resources and the established implementation period.
B.1 SOCIAL IMPACT	Shows the possibility of the regeneration project to improve the quality of life and social cohesion of the villagers and to create new jobs in the tourist sector for the inhabitants of the village and the municipality of Përmet
B.2 TOURISM ENHANCEMENT	Shows the potential of the regeneration initiative to increase tourist flows, in the short and medium term, while respecting the principles of social and environmental sustainability
B.3 EFFECTIVENESS	Shows the priority to implement the regeneration initiative over others due to its ability to create social and economic value for the villagers or because it is preparatory to the activation of other initiatives.

4.1.2 Objectives

The project to redevelop the path between the thermal area and the village of Bënjë aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- Attract to Bënjë some of the visitors to the thermal baths, an established tourist destination;
- Create an immersive experience of 'slow' enjoyment of the landscape;
- Redevelop the parvis and adjacent spaces of St Mary's Church, the most important public space in the village.

In more forward-looking terms, the project aspires to:

- Implement a pilot experience that can be replicated with the necessary adaptations, also in other Albanian contexts of high landscape value, starting with the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park which the path runs through;
- Strengthen local identity and social cohesion by enhancing the territorial heritage found in the Bënjë area;
- Create socio-economic value to benefit the inhabitants of Bënjë and of the Përmet area.

4.1.3 Methodology

After a desk analysis (scientific literature, 'grey' literature, cartography by consulting Albanian geoportals), the working group carried out two site visits in order to explore the different dimensions of the context.[2] In this phase, surveys (photographic, video and, limited to the eastern parvis, metric with traditional instruments) were carried out and a working meeting was organised with locals selected for their knowledge of the problems to be analysed, at the Multifunctional Centre in Përmet.[3] [Fig. 4.1]

The critical shortage of up-to-date and consistent cartographic information proved to be a tough test for the working group. In the absence of an instrumental survey, the course of the route was reconstructed with great difficulty and there are margins of uncertainty that will have to be overcome after the working drawing has been drafted.

Figure 4.1 – A moment of the DIDA working group meeting with some locals at the Përmet Multifunctional Centre (7.10.2021).

[2] The first inspection took place from 28.6 to 3.7.2021 and the second from 4.10 to 8.10.2021.

[3] The meeting was held on 7.10.2021. In addition to the members of the DIDA working group, it was attended by Berjan Premto, an archaeologist at the IKTK in Gjirokastër, Sotir Nauni, the last primary school teacher in Bënjë, Aleks Tohde, a former local representative of the IKTK, and Alex Tane and Ardian Gigo from CESVI.

On the basis of this analysis, it was decided to divide the project into four *functional lots*: [Fig. 4.2]

- Functional Lot 1: Path leading from the car park of the thermal bath area to the village of Bënjë;
- Functional Lot 2: Connection between Kadiu Bridge and the path (Lot 1);
- Functional Lot 3: Parvis of St Mary's Church and adjacent spaces;
- Functional Lot 4: Former school building of the village.

The work described below focuses on Lot 1 and Lot 3. In agreement with the clients, the remaining lots were excluded from the project due to uncertainties regarding the future of the thermal baths area (Lot 2)[4] and to streamline the available economic resources (Lot 4).

In any case, some design suggestions were also provided for Lots 2 and 4, to be implemented, if possible, in the near future. [see Tab. 02]

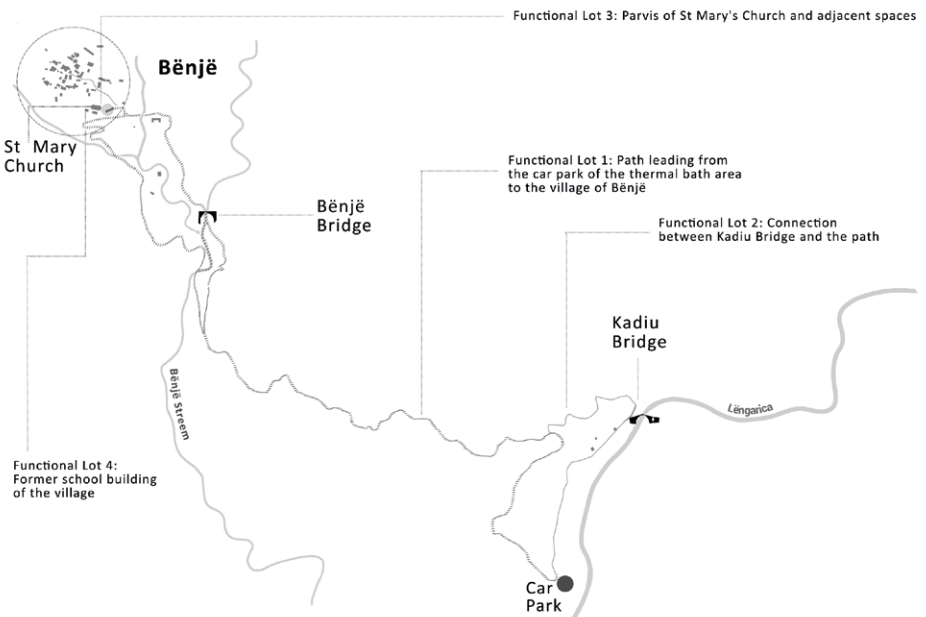


Figure 4.2 – Diagrammatic map of the path with identification of the four functional lots. [Author: Eni Nurihana].

For Lot 1, the plan is to improve the walkability and landscape enjoyment of the path connecting the parking area of the thermal bath area with the village of Bënjë. The aim, as mentioned above, is to encourage tourist access to the village by means of an immersive experiential route through the natural landscape. The design of the path was conceived and developed in a transcalar manner, combining different types of construction and management interventions.

Lot 2 connects the path, at the point where it turns sharply to the left in the direction of the village, with Kadiu Bridge and corresponds to the final section of the ancestral path that led from Bënjë to the thermal baths area. In this section, some points of which are now impassable, the work involves creating a hiking trail with a medium-high lev-

[4] See § 3.2.

el of difficulty, and the construction of two wooden boardwalks to overcome unstable portions of ground in the thalweg line area.

Lot 3 concerns the redevelopment of the open spaces of the St Mary's Architectural Complex. The eastern part of the parvis is the most important public space in the village and, as such, could fulfil common individual or social needs of outdoor living and provide a space for holding cultural events of local religious and civic tradition.[5]

Lot 4 involves the restoration and functional restructuring of the former village school building into an environmental culture and tourist reception centre with the inclusion of new functions such as a medical clinic, tourist information and services (guides and sports activities), the sale of typical local products, and an ATM machine.

Table 4.2 summarises the interventions that the project proposes to address in the different functional lots.

For each of the two functional lots developed by design (Lot 1 and Lot 3), the same three-stage work procedure was followed:

1. *Analysis phase*, aimed at acquiring the necessary information about the study context and highlighting the strengths and weaknesses;
2. *Strategic phase*, coinciding with the drafting of a *narrative master plan*;
3. *Proposal phase*, encompassing all the proposed project interventions.

With regard to Functional Lot 1, it was decided to break the route down into *Nodes* and *Sections*.

A *Node* is a point on the path, recognisable for its specific physical, sensory-perceptual or cultural characteristics, whose attraction potential is such that it could even become a focal point of the path. *Sections* are the segments of the path that connect the Nodes. The reading of the sites, the structuring of the narrative master plan and the elaboration of the design solutions follow this approach.[6]

The study of Functional Lot 3 was approached by taking a different methodological path. Following a careful survey of the site, the critical issues and potential of the external spaces of St Mary's Church[7] were identified.

For both functional lots, 'widespread' design interventions have also been planned, i.e. interventions that cannot be identified with a particular point/part of the scenario in question.

The project interventions are described in a *narrative master plan*.[8] The narrative master plan proposes a tabular and descriptive representation of the planned actions, ordering and organising them according to their typology. At the same time, it explicitly sets out the design intentions as well as the general rules, properties and requirements qualifying the interventions, making it possible to monitor their compliance with the objectives pursued in the project. The narrative master plan provides an easily readable guiding tool for both the clients and those responsible for drafting the working drawing and represents the index matrix of project interventions described and analysed in-depth on a case-by-case basis. In the narrative master plan for Functional Lot 3 (redevelopment of the external spaces of St Mary's Church), the proposed interventions were divided into *Conservation* and *Enhancement*.

[5] It should be noted that the entire St Mary's Architectural Complex is the property of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

[6] As regards Lot 1, for the landscape description of the Sections of the paths see § 3.2; for the description of the most significant anthropic interventions along the path see § 3.3.

[7] For a description of St Mary's Architectural Complex and its exterior spaces, see § 2.3.1.

[8] See § 4.2.2 for the narrative master plan concerning the interventions planned for Lot 1 and § 4.3.2 for the narrative master plan concerning the interventions planned for Lot 3.

After delivery of the preliminary project to the clients (8.3.2022), the working group held discussions with the Albanian professionals in charge of drafting the working drawing. During a third mission in Bënjë,[9] they discussed with technical staff from AICS specific aspects of the intervention and how the project would be implemented.

Table 4.2 – Regeneration work related to individual functional lots. The interventions developed by design as part of the research are shown in bold.

FUNCTIONAL LOTS	PLANNED INTERVENTIONS
1. Path leading from the car park of the thermal baths area to the village of Bënjë.	Improvement of the footpath conditions in order to facilitate access to Bënjë by means of an immersive experience of nature. The path regeneration includes: (1) marking the entrance to the path (*Lower Gate*), (2) the creation of solutions and equipment to make it usable paying particular attention to their integration into the landscape and cost control (construction and maintenance), (3) the adoption of appropriate consolidation techniques to make it safe, and (4) improving the path's degree of accessibility.
2. Connection between Kadiu Bridge and the path (Lot 1)	Creation of a trekking route (for experienced hikers only). The route includes the construction of two wooden boardwalks to overcome unstable portions of ground in the thalweg line area.
3. Parvis of St Mary's Church and adjacent spaces	Redevelopment of the spaces inside the walls that delimit St Mary's Architectural Complex, paying particular attention to the east parvis as the final point of the path (*Upper Gate*) and reception area for visitors.
4. Former village school building.	Restoration and functional restructuring of the school building into an environmental culture and tourist reception centre.

4.2 The design of the path between the thermal area and Bënjë

Francesco Alberti, Mirko Romagnoli

4.2.1 Introduction

The path from the car park of the thermal area to Bënjë is approximately 2.5 km long, with a difference in altitude of 170.64 m and a maximum gradient of 20%. The average travel time (round trip) is about two hours. It offers many and varied opportunities to enjoy the landscape of the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park and is a prime corridor to immerse oneself in the rich natural and landscape context described in § 3.2. In this sense, the entire route takes on the characteristics of a natural "botanical garden". [Fig. 4.3] Walking along it provides opportunities to appreciate the deep connection between humans and nature: from ancient *kalldrëm* paving, forestry and hydraulic works to architectural landmarks (see § 3.3).

The project choices are designed to:

- Enhance the landscape along the whole path and prime views of the surroundings;
- Carefully integrate the proposed interventions into the context, respecting the characteristics of the surrounding landscape and those specific to it, and following the natural slope of the land;
- Bring out the path's historical-cultural link with the village of Bënjë, which is its end point, also through a symbolic narration of the places.[10]

[9] From 2022-10-04 to 10-08.

[10] In this regard, see in particular the design proposal for Gypsy Square (Node D).

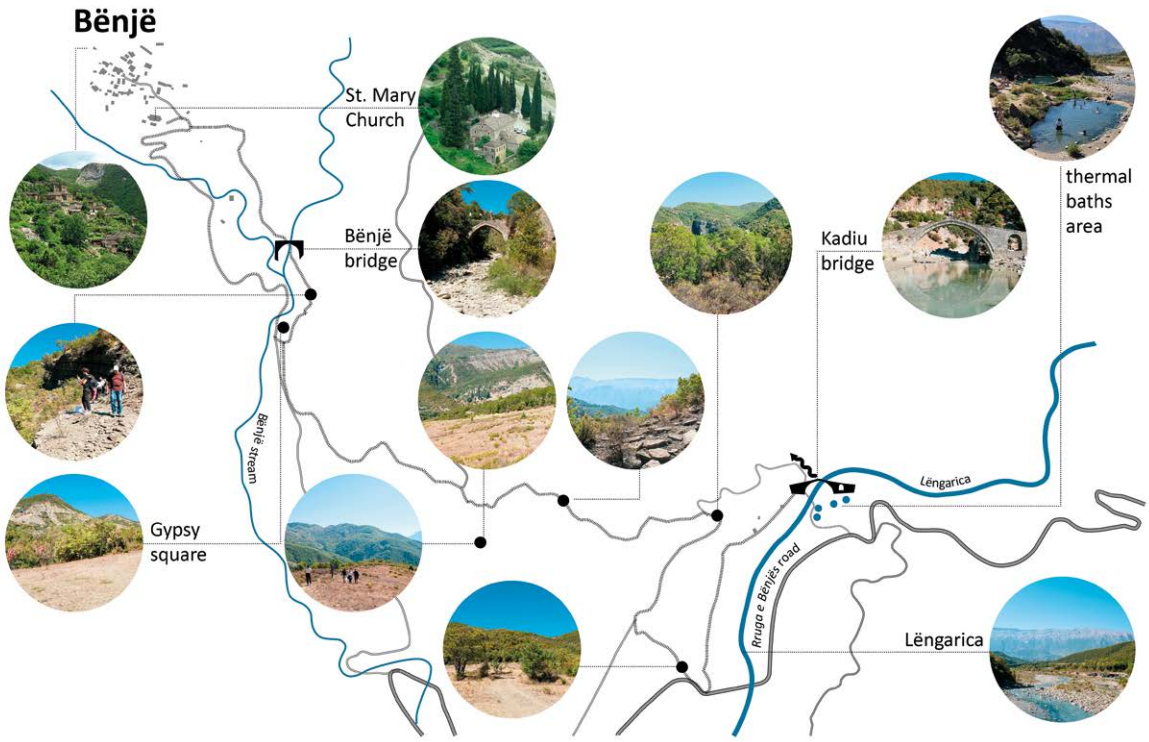


Figure 4.3 – The scenarios that open up along the path.

The redevelopment of a path starts with the maintenance of what is already there. This involves minimal forestry work such as vegetation control, scrub clearance and cutting back the greenery, so that it is always passable and of the desired width, as well as cutting away plants that have fallen or that are at risk of falling, particularly in the rest areas along the path. The project does not include, and in fact advises against, the planting of new trees or shrubs, with a few exceptions. Extraordinary maintenance works also include localised solutions to manage and reduce the ruggedness of the walking surface.

Interventions carried out from scratch involve both some supporting equipment, such as seating and signage, and the creation of information points and spaces for stopping, resting and meeting that can be identified as "special places" in relation to the environmental surroundings. These also include equipped viewpoints – a turret and a panoramic viewpoint positioned on a natural terrace – to enhance the most picturesque and interesting views, thereby contributing to the narrative of a territory with multiple visual identities, in terms of both panorama and immersive experience.

The design of the path, as a route linking two poles (the thermal bath area and the village) through a varied landscape, is therefore configured as a coordinated sequence of different micro-interventions, specifically localised or diffuse.

4.2.2 The structure of the project

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the variety of situations encountered along the path have been traced back to an orderly sequence of *Nodes* and *Sections*. More specifically, the project proposes linking, through landscape-qualified connections (Sections), the most interesting features along the path (Nodes) – some of which are

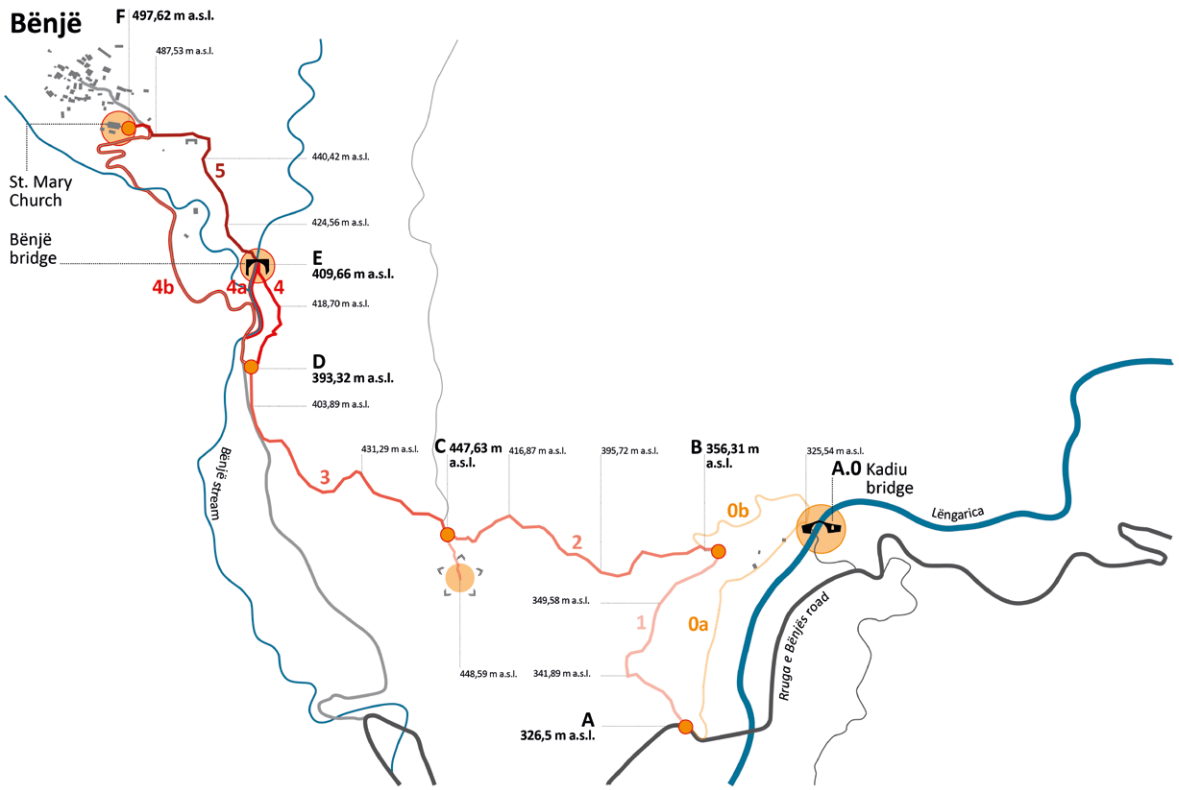


Figure 4.4 – Division of the path into Sections and Nodes. [Author: Eni Nurihana].

already present and some of which are planned – so as to enhance the scenic or picturesque potential of some of its points. The identification of the Nodes was the starting point of the design process. [Fig. 4.4]

The division of the path into Nodes and Sections should not be thought of as a 'reduction' process, but rather a method of managing and bringing out its complexity. The analysis by parts is useful for the rational organisation of information, but each part of the path, be it a Node or a Section, was nevertheless thought of as component of a complex landscape system.

Table 4.3 provides a brief description of the points of interest identified as Nodes.

Table 4.3 – List and summary description of the Nodes along the path.

THE NODES OF THE PATH		
	NODE A.0	KADIU BRIDGE Category I Cultural Monument, an artefact of high historical, architectural and landscape value.
	NODE A	LOWER GATE (326 m a.s.l.) Arrangement of the area in front of the parking lot of the thermal bath area, equipped with an information point, which recognisably marks the start of the route.
	NODE B	PANORAMIC VIEWPOINT (356 m a.s.l.) A tower located in a clearing of the path, offering an extensive view of the lower Lëngarica Valley, the canyon and the Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë Mountain Range.

THE NODES OF THE PATH		
	NODE C	OBSERVATORY (448 m a.s.l.) Panoramic lookout on a plateau overlooking both the lower tributary valley and the main valley of the Vjosa, with a broad view of the Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë Mountain Range.
	NODE D	GYPSY SQUARE (395 m a.s.l.) A small clearing, historically used as a nomadic market, which provides a break along the path and a prime view of the village of Bënjë.
	NODE E	BËNJË BRIDGE (410 m a.s.l.) Category I Cultural Monument, affording views of the bed of the Bënjë Stream and the more superficial geological sections generated by its passage over time.
	NODE F	PARVIS OF ST MARY'S CHURCH - UPPER GATE (497 m a.s.l.) The end point of the path, historically the hub of community life in Bënjë, is a place rich in religious, cultural and social significance. It offers a beautiful view of the Lëngarica Valley.

Note that Kadiu Bridge (Node A.0) falls within the portion of the path inside the thermal bath area, which is excluded from the project presented here. The consolidation of Bënjë Bridge is also not included in the project. This work is very urgent (see § 3.3) and requires careful investigations and dedicated resources.

On the basis of the subdivision into lots defined in § 4.1, the rehabilitation of the external spaces of St Mary's Church in Bënjë (Node F) is the only intervention belonging to Lot 3.

In Table 4.4, the Sections forming the path, whose landscape characteristics were described in § 3.2, are defined in relation to the succession of Nodes marking the route: from the thermal bath area downstream to the village of Bënjë upstream.

Table 4.4 – Brief description of the Sections of the path.

THE SECTIONS OF THE PATH	
SECTION 0a	Section that joins Kadiu Bridge (NODE A.0) with the Lower Gate (NODE A)
SECTION 0b	Connecting section between Kadiu Bridge (NODE A.0) and the path
SECTION 1	Starting section connecting the Lower Gate (NODE A) with the Panoramic Viewpoint (NODE B)
SECTION 2	Intermediate section connecting the Panoramic Viewpoint (NODE B) with the 360° Observatory (NODE C)
SECTION 3	Intermediate section connecting the 360° Observatory (NODE C) with Gypsy Square (NODE D)
SECTION 4	Intermediate section connecting Gypsy Square (NODE D) with Bënjë Bridge (NODE E)
SECTION 4a	Alternative route section to 4b using a portion of the bed of the Bënjë Stream
SECTION 4b	Final section of the road, alternative to 4 and 5, connecting Gypsy Square (NODE D) with the parvis of St Mary's Church (NODE F)
SECTION 5	Final section linking Bënjë Bridge (NODE E) with the Upper Gate, the east parvis of St Mary's Church (NODE F)

Figure 4.5 – Photo of the path along Section 4 *(left)* and the two alternatives: Section 4a *(top right)* and Section 4b *(bottom right)*.

Note that the two initial Sections (0a and 0b) are within the area of the Bredhi i Hotoves-Dangelli National Park Visitor Centre and the Bënjë Thermal Baths. This is one of the intervention areas included in the Plan of Priority Actions, Strategic Investments and Pilot Development Projects" of the General Local Territorial Plan of Përmet (see § 1.1), for which access regulation is under examination. These Sections have therefore not been examined in-depth in this study, which aims to design a hiking route to Bënjë that, while connected to the thermal bath area, can be used freely and without restrictions.

Starting from the Lower Gate (Node A), located near the car parks at the entrance to the tourist development area, the route runs smoothly along Sections 1 and 2, overlooking the Lëngarica Valley, and along Section 3, on the innermost slope dominated by the village, passing through Nodes B, C and D.

From there, Sections 4 and 5 follow the original route of the path, which leads from Gypsy Square (Node D) to the village via Bënjë Bridge (Node E). With regard to Section 4, however, it must be emphasised that its walkability is today severely affected by the limited width of the route and the presence of an extensive scree formation that is very steep and subject to erosion. [Fig. 4.5] In particular, the hillside route over the scree stratum on the hydrographical left of the Bënjë Stream has a segment of approximately 70 metres in length, downstream of the bridge, which is characterised by a high level of difficulty even with appropriate equipment. Due to the crumbliness of the rocks that make up the geological outcrop formation of the slope, a suspended path anchored to stable parts of the ground cannot be considered. More simply and with a higher possibility of adaptation to any movement of

the scree, the pathway could be shaped manually with a pickaxe for a cross-sectional area of around 60 cm and a dry containment wall constructed with local stones[11] in order to connect the parts that are already passable, up to the bridge. The bridge, as mentioned, is in urgent need of consolidation work; moreover, it is unsafe to cross due to the absence of a parapet (see § 3.3).

Given the complex conditions of Section 4, it was considered appropriate to provide an alternative route to reach the village. With this objective, Sections 4a and 4b were identified. [Figs. 4.4 and 4.5] Section 4a skirts the clearing identified as Gypsy Square and uses the bed of the Bënjë Stream to reach the bridge, of which it offers a prime view from below, also allowing the geological strata of the banks to be observed. However, it is only passable during the summer dry season. In addition, the reconnection to the path at the bridge level (Section 5) is made difficult by the slope of the escarpment and the debris flaking affecting it, for which preliminary checks must be carried out for safety and the possible installation of climbing aids. These limitations suggest expanding the range of alternative routes to Bënjë, also considering the final segment of the unpaved road, which, passing by Gypsy Square, leads directly to the entrance of the village (Section 4b), where St Mary's Church is located (Node F). This route has comfortable gradients, road surfaces and width, and is set in a picturesque landscape characterised by the geographical features of the main Vjosa Valley and the scenic presence of the village of Bënjë (see § 3.2). In the final part, there are thalweg lines affected by instability due to the surface runoff of rainwater, for which drainage channel grates, drains, diversions and light works must be constructed to overcome them.

> It must be remembered that, in this Section, the road becomes impassable in the winter resulting in the isolation of the village. The route, in fact, intersects the Bënjë Stream at the bottom of the valley (after the confluence of its tributary, the Oskrusheve) and is difficult to ford when the stream flow levels are moderate and when it is flooding. As part of the work on the *Rruga e Bënjës*, it is therefore necessary to build a road bridge to cross the stream. This work, which is highly significant for village life, would require impact assessments and specialised studies beyond the scope of this proposal.

4.2.3 The analytical sheets

Analytical sheets were prepared for each Node and each Section of the path (a total of nine sheets for the Sections and six for the Nodes).

The sheets are divided into two parts. [Fig. 4.6 and 4.7] The first part contains the *key plan* (top right), an orthophoto showing the location of the Section or Node (bottom left), a description, some significant data (which in the case of Nodes is limited to the altimetric height, while for the Sections it includes the length, height difference, average slope, departure and arrival altitude and degree of difficulty), and, finally, two boxes summarising the potential and critical issues found during the surveys.[12]

The description, potential and critical issues are specifically referenced in the text with images from the photographic diary, which is the second section of the sheet.

[11] See the narrative master plan (§ 4.2.4) for a more detailed explanation of the planned solution for Section 4.

[12] At the bottom of the first section of the sheet there are also references to the project interventions related to the considered Section or Node as described in the narrative master plan. For the Sections, these correspond to the codes of the indexed interventions.

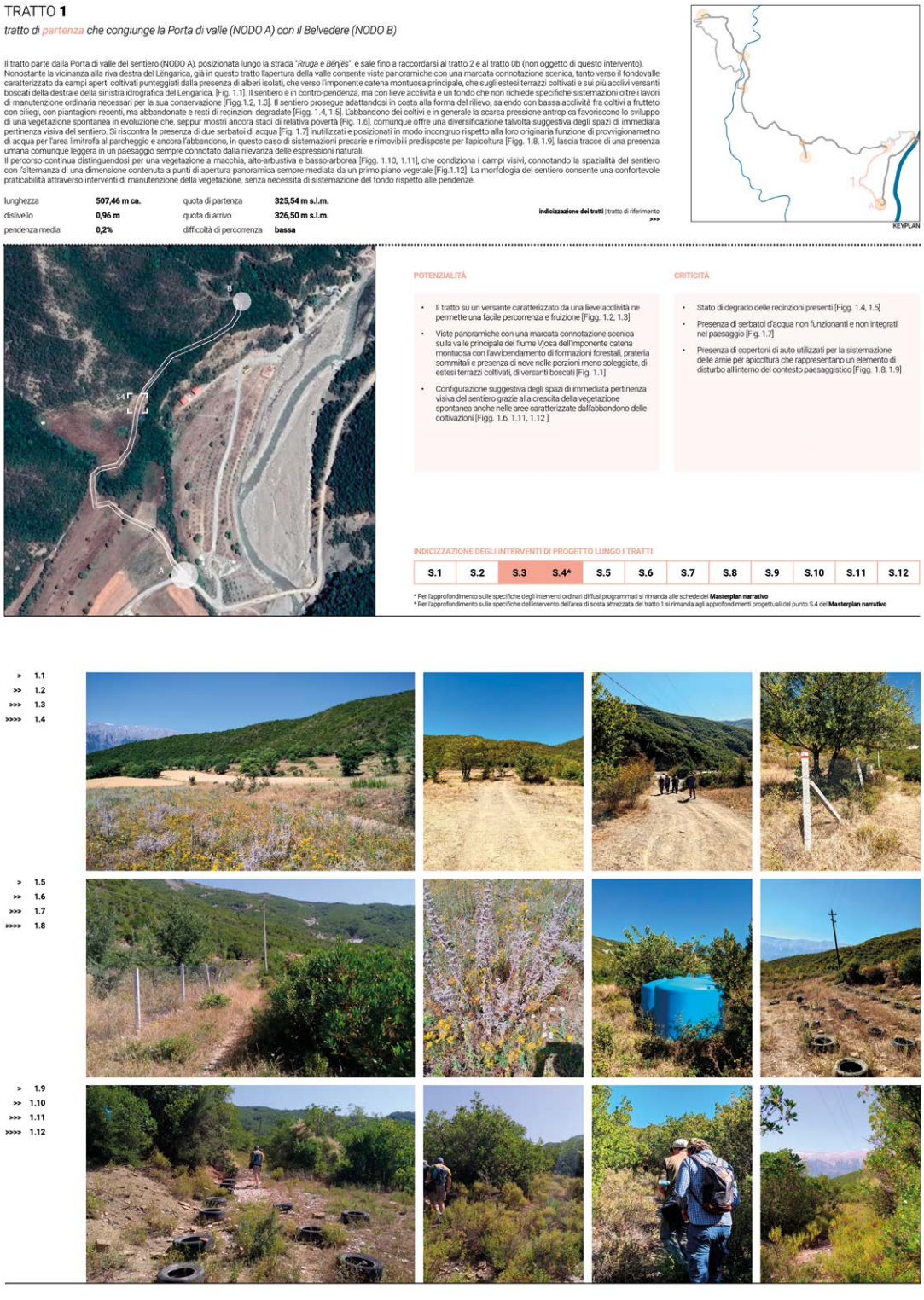


Figure 4.6 – Example of a Path Section sheet.

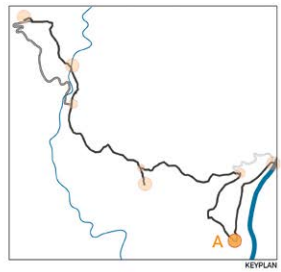
NODO **A**

PORTA DI VALLE

ingresso al sentiero, prospiciente la strada carrabile lungo il torrente Lëngarica

La Porta di valle, prospiciente la strada carrabile "*Rruga e Bënjës*" [Figg. A.1, A.2], lungo il torrente [Fig. A.3], costituisce un punto identitario e di informazione.
L'area si trova in adiacenza al futuro ingresso regolamentato del complesso termale e rappresenta il punto iniziale del Tratto 1 e dell'intero sentiero [Figg. A.4, A.5]. La Porta di valle del sentiero si apre sulla strada attraverso uno slargo che crea una piccola area utile affinché gli escursionisti non occupino la sede stradale carrabile [Figg. A.2, A.4].
Il nodo, da cui parte il sentiero che conduce al villaggio di Bënjë, rappresenta un riferimento geografico, culturale e sociale [Figg. A.6, A.7], punto di incontro tra il paesaggio fluviale del Lëngarica, il fondovalle caratterizzato da campi aperti coltivati e alberi sparsi e i versanti boscati della destra e della sinistra idrografica del Lëngarica [Figg. A.3].
Questa 'porta' è un luogo materiale e immateriale, rappresenta un punto fisico su una mappa ma anche l'inizio di un'esperienza e di un viaggio, motivo per cui deve essere caratterizzato da un intervento intimamente legato alla natura del luogo e che risulti perfettamente integrato nel contesto paesaggistico e culturale di riferimento. Il nodo risulta oggi già caratterizzato da un elemento tangibile e puntuale, un albero isolato di *Cercis siliquastrum*. esistente [Fig. A.8, A.9], la cui fruizione attuale già ne dichiara la vocazione. Il luogo contiene al contempo un segnale, un'identità, una riconoscibilità e una condizione architettonica di micro habitat, l'albero è un punto di riferimento spaziale ma concede al viaggiatore una 'pausa' riparata dal sole nella stagione più calda.

indicizzazione dei nodi | nodo di riferimento >>>
quota altimetrica | **326,50 m s.l.m.**



KEYPLAN

POTENZIALITÀ

- Contesto paesaggistico di rilievo caratterizzato dalla prossimità del fiume Lëngarica e dal paesaggio rurale che la circonda [Fig. A.3]
- Fondo stradale dell'area interna al sentiero in buono stato che non richiede specifiche sistemazioni oltre i necessari lavori di manutenzione ordinaria [Figg. A.2, A.4]
- Presenza di un albero (*Cercis siliquatrum*) nelle immediate vicinanze che oltre a caratterizzare l'area in termini morfologici e di riconoscibilità spaziale del luogo, provvede a fornire con la sua ombra condizioni micro-climatiche favorevoli alla sosta nei periodi/momenti più caldi [Fig. A.8, A.9]

CRITICITÀ

- Scarsa visibilità e riconoscibilità dell'ingresso al sentiero [Figg. A.1, A.2, A.6]
- Assenza di dispositivi di informazione [Figg. A.2, A.6]
- Rapporto critico con le recinzioni che saranno installate al confine dell'area termale [Fig. A.4]

INTERVENTI DI PROGETTO

Realizzazione di luogo di ritrovo, sosta e riposo, informazione, con connotati identificabili rispetto all'immediato intorno, che segnalino l'inizio del sentiero.

* Per un approfondimento specifico sulle azioni progettuali previste si rimanda alle schede del Nodo A_ Porta di Valle della sezione *Interventi sui Nodi* del ***Masterplan narrativo***

> **A.1**
>> **A.2**
>>> **A.3**



> **A.4**
>> **A.5**
>>> **A.6**



> **A.7**
>> **A.8**
>>> **A.9**



Figure 4.7 – Example of a Path Node sheet.

4.2.4 The narrative master plan

As indicated earlier, the narrative master plan is the index matrix of the planned interventions and indicates the actions necessary for the redevelopment of the path. For the purpose of proper and comprehensive operational planning, the interventions were divided into:

- *Widespread ordinary interventions*: these concern maintenance of vegetation and restoration of the path to improve the usability of both the Nodes and the Sections; [Tab 4.5]
- *Interventions along the Sections*: these comprise minor interventions, with low impact on the landscape and low cost, aimed at improving the functionality of the path; [Tab 4.6]
- *Interventions in the Nodes*: these are the most important architectural interventions, concentrated in the nerve centres of the path, designed to enhance the special characteristics of the places by increasing their attractiveness and usability. [Tab 4.7]

Table 4.5 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 1 for the part concerning widespread ordinary interventions.

WIDESPREAD ORDINARY INTERVENTIONS	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
O.1	**Maintenance work on vegetation without changing the section of the path**
	Clearing and cutting back the scrub in the section of the path and the planned resting and use areas that don't require ground adjustment with respect to the section and slopes. Preservation of the different spatial connotation: no thinning of the wild vegetation is planned in stretches where the vegetation preserves the views of the surrounding geographical features characterising the path and enhancing the panoramic viewpoints. The scrub vegetation, ranging from high-shrub to low-arboreal, affects the visual fields, characterising the spatiality of the path with alternating contained areas and open panoramic points, always mediated by a foreground of wild vegetation. Beneath the vegetation, the path often has scattered and degraded rocky outcrops. Some sections of the path are affected by rainwater surface runoff where the vegetation, mostly shrubby, is low and sparse, characterising the visibility of the surroundings and in some sections also allowing a view of the valley floor. Along the route, some areas have only herbaceous cover with the characteristics of secondary grassland and the absence of tree formations.
O.2	**Removal of fallen plants and cutting of plants at risk of falling onto the path**
	The removal of branches and plants that have fallen or are at risk of falling on the path requires periodic monitoring.
O.3	**Orientation aids**
	Arrangement and renewal of trail markers at the most difficult to recognise points and changes in the route of the path. Trail markers refer to intermediate, horizontal markers created by painting a red and a white stripe on stones or logs placed on the ground on one side of the path. In order to indicate the continuity of the path, the trail markers should be placed close to the forks and, if possible, every 5 to 10 minutes of travel time.
O.4	**Preservation and maintenance of vegetation in areas characterised by surface landslides and flows**
	The action of the plant root system and its density is a very important factor in protecting slopes from hydrogeological disruption.
O.5	**Removal of incongruous elements along the path**
	Along the path, elements alien to the natural landscape are found (plastic boilers, car tyres, various kinds of waste). Sometimes such objects were used for activities that are no longer practised. These objects are in a state of neglect, generate visual disturbance and represent an environmental problem and should therefore be removed.

Table 4.6 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 1 for the part concerning interventions along the Sections.

INTERVENTIONS ALONG THE SECTIONS		SECTIONS						
CODES	DESCRIPTION	1	2	3	4	4a	4b	5
S.1	**Selective cutting of vegetation with minor changes to the path section**		■		■			■
	The extraordinary maintenance of the vegetation to enlarge the section of the path include the discontinuous felling of larger plants that have grown on the verges or the trimming of tree crowns in sections with closed scrub, reduced sections of the path, or close to the architectural elements of the project. Interventions concerning changes in vegetation formations such as selective cutting in the side strips of the path must be assessed, especially where resting and use spaces are planned in the project (see project insights S.4 and Interventions on Nodes). Periodic monitoring of the effects of maintenance work is necessary.							
S.2	**Rainwater regulation in runoff areas**		■		■			
	Rainwater runoff has resulted in erosions and collapses in some sections of the path. To determine what type of intervention is to be carried out the specific conditions of each point need to be assessed. Depending on the type of runoff and the characteristics of the route (path or dirt road), three intervention types are proposed: **1.** At the intersections between thalwegs and stretches of dirt road, the stability and continuity of the route must be safeguarded with underground drains fitted with a vertical metal drainage channel grate and small hydraulic dissipation works in dry stone downstream. If the thalwegs have obstructions or there is river bank degradation in their initial sections upstream of the route, manual reshaping will be required. **2.** At the intersections between the thalwegs and path sections, the stability and continuity of the path must be safeguarded with surface drainage consisting of dry-laid stone crossings. **3.** In cases of intense widespread runoff with pronounced erosion, a channel drain must be created upstream of the path or road by means of pick-axing, and the ground must be restored manually using locally sourced material, if available. If the runoff is weak and there is minor erosion, routine maintenance of the ground is sufficient using locally sourced material, if available.							
S.3	**Creation of a signalling element ('threshold') at turning points or at the intersection between Sections and Nodes**		■	■	■			
	Points where major changes of direction occur and intersections between Sections and Nodes must be appropriately signposted. The signage, on the walking surface as well as in elevation, must be in keeping with the characteristics of the place.							

See project drawings

INTERVENTIONS ALONG THE SECTIONS		SECTIONS						
CODES	DESCRIPTION	1	2	3	4	4a	4b	5
S.4	**Creation of rest areas with seating and support surfaces**		■		■			■
	The rest areas will be created through the dry placement of erratic stones transported for short distances with mini tracked dumpers, the installation of seats made of solid wood and/or support surfaces made of wooden boards and corten steel.							

See project drawings

INTERVENTIONS ALONG THE SECTIONS		SECTIONS						
CODES	DESCRIPTION	1	2	3	4	4a	4b	5
S.5	**Partial grading of the steepest points to help overcome slopes**		■		■	■		■
	The morphology of the path alternates between sections that are comfortably passable and sections that are particularly steep, above all the section of the path close to the village. In sections of medium to high difficulty due to the presence of extensive scree formations, aids to overcome the slopes are required, such as steps, preferably made of local stone.							
S.6	**Fall protection systems and movement aids at the steepest points**		■		■			
	In the most impassable sections, it is necessary to install protective devices and supports for climbing, such as guardrails and handrails.	*See project drawings*						
S.7	**Restoration of traditional *kalldrëm* paving**							■
	The intervention includes removal of the existing paving, when necessary, and integration of the missing parts, with the arrangement of the substrate and the laying of the stone elements.							
S.8	**Restoration of the route's continuity on hillside sections characterised by instability caused by natural scree formations**				■			
	The hillside passage over the scree layer on the hydrographical left of the Bënjë Stream lies on a geological formation that is not sufficiently stable to support the anchorages of a possible suspended path. It is therefore proposed to connect the parts of the path that are already passable by constructing 60 cm wide sections of the path manually shaped with a pickaxe and the eventual construction of dry stone walls with local stones.	*The intervention, which requires continuous monitoring and routine maintenance on an annual basis, is not covered by this preliminary project.*						
S.9	**Restoration of the road surface of vehicular sections**			■				■
	The intervention involves the restoration of the road with a foundation and paving made of macadam-type quarry stabilisation. In order to prevent the aggregates being washed away by rain and jeopardising the work, it is also necessary to provide a conduit to ensure effective surface water runoff.	*Not covered by this preliminary project*						
S.10	**Vehicle bridge**							■
	Construction of a vehicle bridge to cross the ford over the Bënjë Stream, which makes the village inaccessible to vehicles during flood periods.	*Not covered by this preliminary project*						
S.11	**Pedestrian bridges**							■
	Construction of wooden bridges to overcome thalweg lines.	*Not covered by this preliminary project*						
S.12	**Slope stabilisation by hydroseeding of 'prati armati'**							■
	In order to stabilise the slope in the vicinity of the pathway by preventing instability and counteracting the erosion of the existing natural scree formations, it is proposed to partially cover the slope with vegetation formations by hydroseeding using proven "prati armati" technologies. It is carried out in a single phase, without site preparation and without the need of topsoil backfill or erosion control works.	*The effectiveness of this intervention depends on the road being renovated with the subsequent channelling of rainwater. Without effective management of surface runoff of rainwater (S2) there would be continuous runoff of aggregates, which would negate the effects of this work. The intervention is described in §4.3.3*						

Table 4.7 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 1 for the part concerning the interventions at the Nodes.

NODE INTERVENTIONS		NODES
CODES	DESCRIPTION	A B C D E F
N.1	**Lower Gate**	■
	Marking the start of the path. Creation of a place to meet, stop and rest and obtain information, with identifiable features in relation to the immediate surroundings.	*See project drawings*
N.2	**Panoramic Viewpoint**	■
	Creation of a viewing tower that raises the viewpoint 5-10 m above ground level and provides a view as far as Kadiu Bridge and the Lëngarica Canyon.	*See project drawings*
N.3	**360° Observatory**	■
	Creation of a landscape observation point in the Bredhi i Hotoves-Dangelli Park, featuring a system of devices providing information on the surrounding landscape and its main natural components.	*See project drawings*
N.4	**Gypsy Square**	■
	Creation of an area for resting and relaxing with an artistic installation in memory of the old Gypsy Square, a place of historical cultural tradition, used by nomadic traders to sell their products.	*See project drawings*
N.5	**Bënjë Bridge**	■
	Recovery of the structure with the consolidation and restoration of degraded, damaged or incongruous parts using traditional techniques and materials. It is also necessary to increase the level of safety of the crossing by considering a design solution that protects against falls appropriate to the structure and the characteristics of the site.	*Not covered by this preliminary project*
N.6	**East parvis of St Mary's Church (Upper Gate)**	■
	Creation of a *kalldrëm* threshold and information supports marking the path's arrival at the village (see project insight S.3).	*For work on the external areas of St Mary's Church (Lot 3), refer to § 4.3.*

Some items of the narrative master plan, relating to the interventions along the Sections (S.2, S.3 and S.4), were illustrated through specific design proposals (see § 4.2.4.1).

Similarly, for four of the six identified Nodes, a preliminary project was drawn up (see § 4.2.4.2). Node E (Bënjë Bridge) is not the subject of this preliminary project, while for Node F (external spaces of St Mary's Church), which coincides with Functional Lot 3, refer to the description provided in § 4.3.

4.2.4.1 Preliminary design of interventions along the Sections

As mentioned, the design proposals for interventions along the Sections concern the following items of the narrative master plan:

- S.2 Rainwater regulation in runoff areas, relating to project option 2 (Interruption of the path with thalweg line), for which the model layout of an underground drainage device for dirt roads is provided;
- S.3 Creation of a signalling element ('threshold') at turning points or at the intersection between Sections and Nodes, of which a model layout is provided for

the creation of paved bands of local sandstone and shaped boundary stones to be placed at the sides;
- S.4 Creation of rest areas with seating and support surfaces, for which a model layout of benches and platforms in solid wood and corten steel is provided.

Intervention S.2 *Model layout of underground drainage for a dirt road*[13]

At some points along the path, which will have to be precisely surveyed during the detailed design phase, there are thalwegs that collect particularly copious flows of rainwater. To ensure the stability and continuity of the roadway, it is necessary to construct an underground drain with an upstream manhole fitted with a vertical grate. The channel must be made of local stone and have a metal comb to retain debris, branches and leaves. An underground drainage pipe returns the drained water downstream by diverting it into the same thalweg intercepted upstream but safeguarding the footpath walking surface. In addition, small hydraulic dissipation work in dry stone is required, either in situ, bedded with mortar or dry constructed. This type of intervention requires periodic monitoring and routine maintenance by cleaning the comb. [Fig. 4.8]

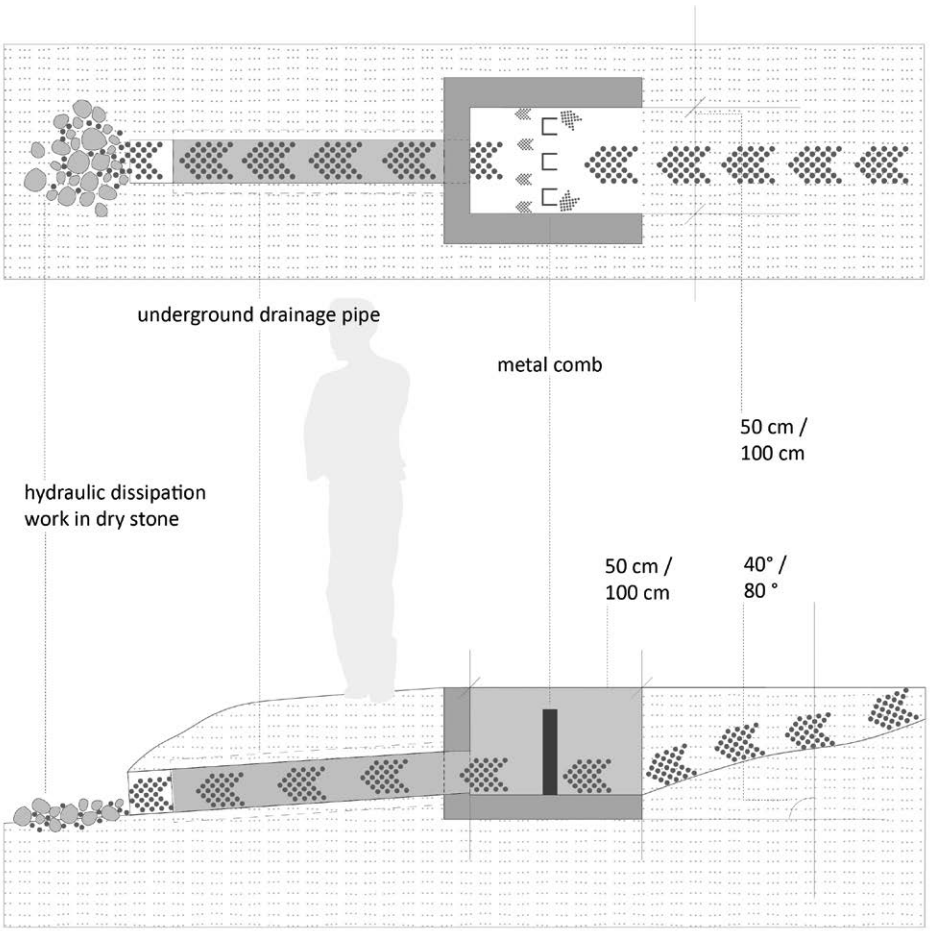


Figure 4.8 – Model layout of a gutter constructed for underground drainage.

[13] Option 1 of Intervention S.2. See Table 5.6.

Intervention S.3 *Model layout for the construction of a local sandstone 'threshold' contained between two shaped boundary stones*

'Thresholds' mark the main points of the route and the intersections between the Sections and the Nodes. At the walking surface level, the thresholds consist of local dry-laid stone paving using the traditional *kalldrëm* technique. The stones are arranged with the thinner edge exposed perpendicular to the direction of the roads, so as to facilitate the ascent of people and mules. In this case, *kalldrëm* paving is instead used to mark the reaching (or passing) of a stage (Node) on the route. It is therefore proposed, as a variant on the original technique, to arrange the stones parallel to the direction of the path, so as to mark its direction, and at the same time suggest the idea of a 'virtual' passage between the Section just travelled and the next one.

Each threshold is characterised by the presence, on either side of the path, of a pair of boundary stones having two perfectly squared and polished sides and two irregularly shaped, rough-cut sides. The boundary stones, which evoke the stones used to mark property boundaries between adjacent plots of land, have a width, length and height of approximately 50/60 cm. One of the two boundary stones can be supplemented with information panels made of corten steel sheets on one or both of the regular sides. The slabs are held by two 'L-shaped' brackets set inside the stone block. The panels bear inscriptions, and any perforated graphic indications are large enough to be easily read from a distance of about 100 cm. The panels must not exceed 180 cm in height; the width may vary as required.

The position of the corners and the panels means that the boundary stones not only mark the arrival at a Node, but also have an information and orientation function. [Fig. 4.9]

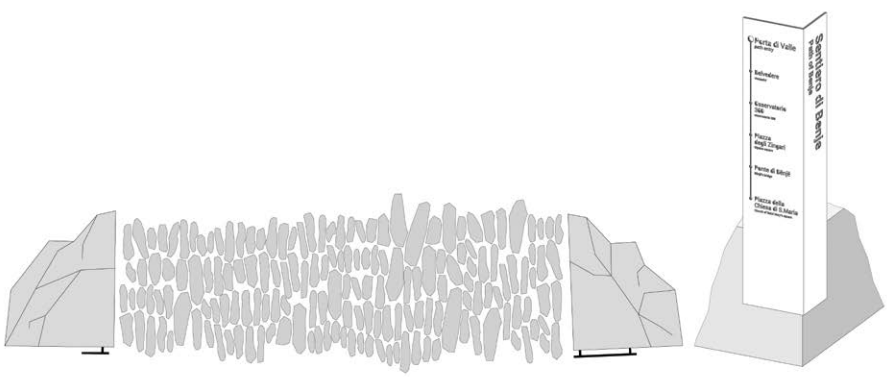


Figure 4.9 – Plan of the 'threshold' and axonometry of a boundary stone.

Intervention S.4 *Model layout of benches and platforms in solid wood and corten steel.*

The seating is made of solid wood planks on corten steel supports. These supports can be anchored to small concrete foundation bases or welded to special steel screws driven into the ground (screw foundation), to a maximum depth of 50 cm. Due to the unevenness of the supporting surface, the foundation systems adopted must ensure that the seat installation height is level. The seats, of two types ("bench" and "platform"), are designed to be economical, easy to assemble and repair, and flexible in use. Seating should be arranged to create different levels of comfort: in shady corners for

the summer season and hot times of the day and in sunny areas for other times of the year and day. Prior to the arrangement of the area, minor work is required to thin out the existing vegetation. [Fig. 4.10]

The bench (S4.1) has a depth of 45/50 cm, a length that can vary between 120 to 180 cm and a height of approx. 45 cm. Two square-section solid wood planks will be anchored to two corten steel supports with an omega profile.

With a construction system similar to that of the bench, larger surfaces (no smaller than 200 x 200 cm) will be created at a height of 30/40 cm above the ground. The platforms (S4.2) will allow for different modes of use, for taking a break, resting and playing. The solid wood planks will be fixed to a steel frame, to be made of 'L' and 'T' profiles.

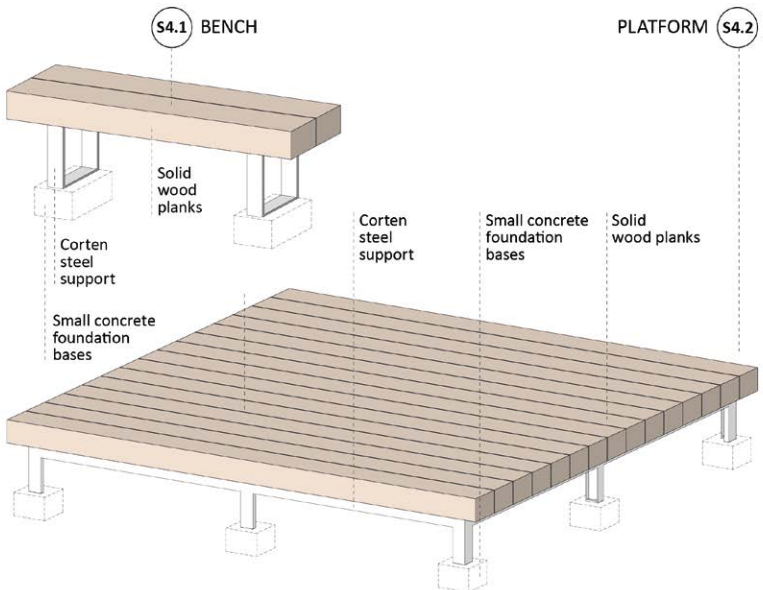


Figure 4.10 – Axonometry of a bench and platform.

Application of the model layout of the seats (S4.1) and platforms (S4.2) in the "Beehive Clearing" in Section 1

Along Section 1 there is a semi-flat clearing. [Fig. 4.11] At present, the area is occupied by car tyres which are used as supports for beehives and represent an element of landscape degradation. Although close to the start of the path (Node A-Lower Gate), the area, due to its size and morphology, is an ideal location for a place to stop and rest, and it can also be used as a meeting point. The project involves the installation of six seats, four simple benches (S4.1) and two platforms (S4.2), positioned in two groups and shaded by newly planted trees. The trees are the *Quercus trojana Webb* type (known in the local language as *Bulgër*), a semi-evergreen species widespread in the Balkan Peninsula and found within the Bredhi i Hotoves-Dangelli National Park. The presence of a boundary stone vaguely resembling a human form completes the layout of the area: it is a reminder of when the path was frequented by the inhabitants of Bënjë and neighbouring towns and represented the only access route to the village. This sculptural object is to be created by local craftsmen by rough shaping an irregular stone block, using a hammer and chisel. [Figs. 4.12 and 4.13] The evocation of human presence through sculptural objects points to a design theme that will take a more complete form in Gypsy Square (Node D).

Figure 4.11 – Clearing of beehives. Photo of the current state.

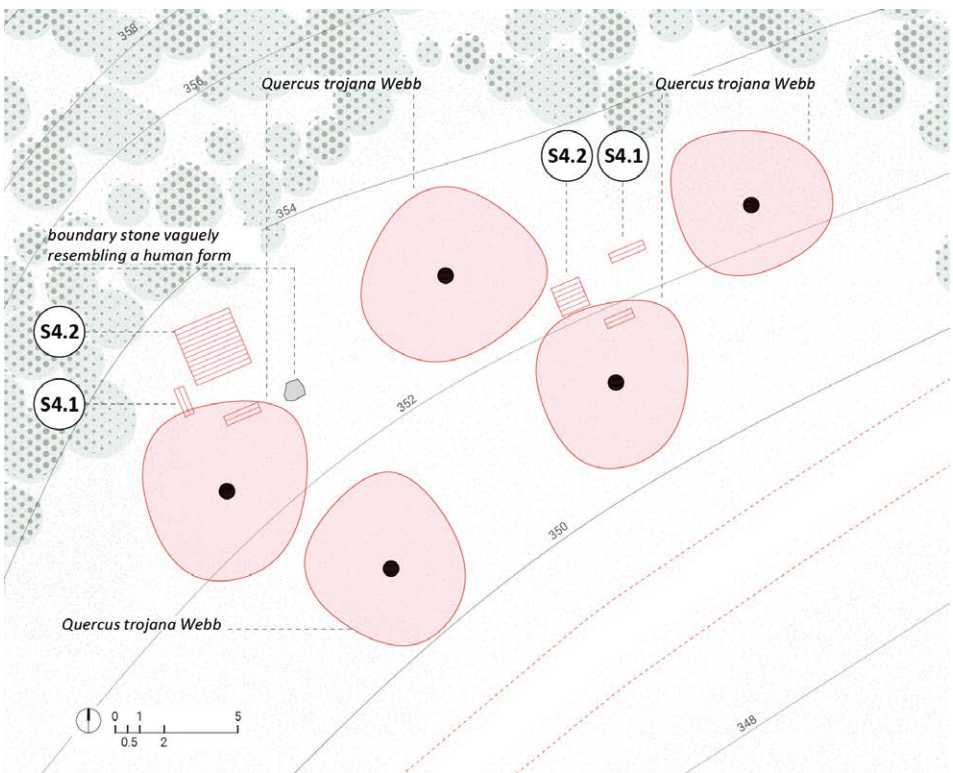


Figure 4.12 – Clearing of beehives. Technical plan.

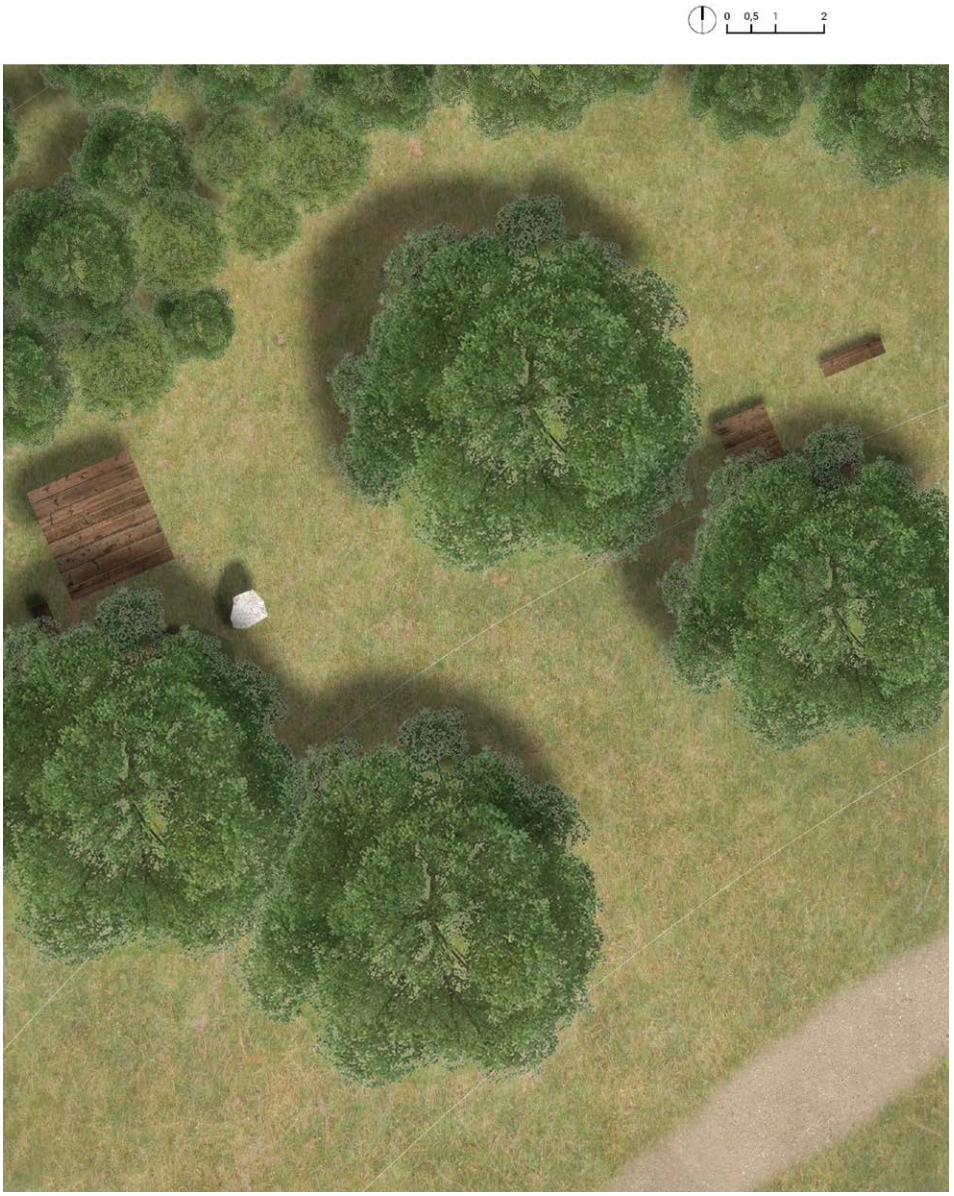


Figure 4.13 – Clearing of beehives. Environmental setting.

4.2.4.2 Preliminary design of Node interventions

This section contains descriptions of the preliminary designs of the Nodes proposed to be built from scratch along the path, following their development from valley to mountain:

- Node A. The Lower Gate
- Node B. The Panoramic Viewpoint
- Node C. The Observatory
- Node D. The Gypsy Square[14]

[14] It should be emphasised that the design solutions presented here are based on rapid site surveys. The definition of an accurate and reliable survey is left to the detailed design phase.

Intervention N.1 *The Lower Gate*

The starting point of the path [Fig. 4.14] leading to the village of Bënjë is a symbolic and geographical reference to be emphasised. Since the area of the thermal baths and Kadiu Bridge could eventually see the controlled management of entrances, it is considered necessary for the path to have independent access from the adjacent car park. The area identified as Node A therefore assumes the characteristics of a 'gateway' to the path. The aim of the project is to enhance the nature of the site, avoiding the introduction of elements that are out of the context and closed forms that are not in dialogue with the landscape. [Figs. 4.15 - 4.17]

Figure 4.14 – Lower Gate. Photo of the current state.

Figure 4.15 – Lower Gate. Project View.

The intervention area is a widening of the *Rruga e Bënjës* road where the asphalt surface of the road and the junction of the dirt path currently merge into a space with an irregular surface and section.

In order to emphasise the point of access to the path ("the Gate") and ensure an adequate transition between the two walking levels, the insertion of an intermediate strip with the same characteristics as the 'thresholds' described in intervention S.3 was planned: *kalldrëm* paving with courses parallel to the direction of the path and two boundary stones placed at the sides. The boundary stone on the right houses an information panel made of perforated corten steel, bearing the name of the path and indicating the various stages.

Node A is characterised by the presence of a *Cercis siliquastrum L.*, which grows wild at the entrance to the path. This tree, the only shady element in an area exposed to sunlight during the warm months, has generated a small, recognisable space for rest and shelter around it. The project intends to reinforce this implicit vocation of the site through a few simple interventions: the addition of three more plants – one of the same species *Cercis siliquastrum L.* and two *Quercus trojana Webb* – and the placement of benches and wooden platforms made according to the model layouts described in intervention S.4 in the area shaded by the trees.

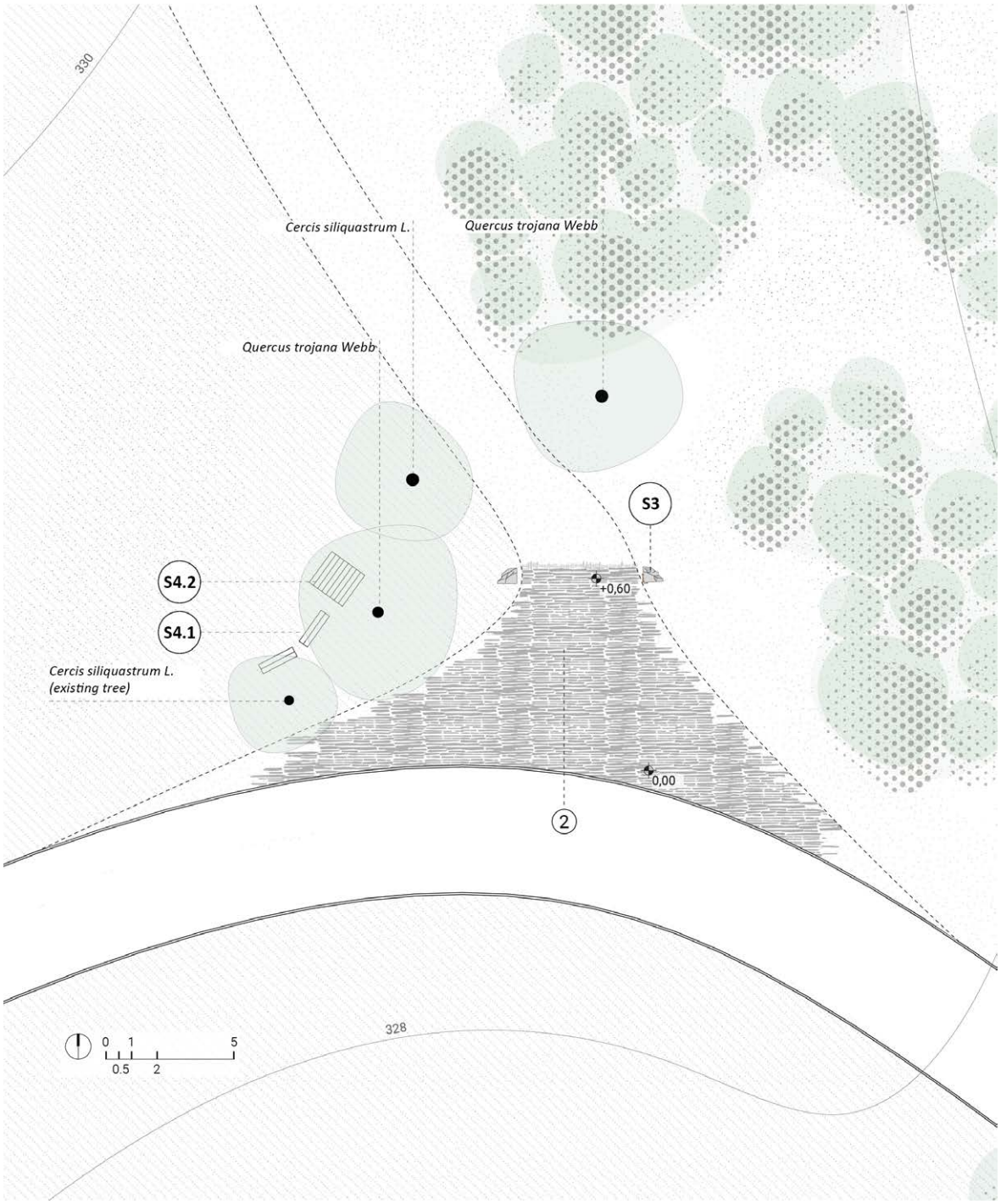


Figure 4.16 – Lower Gate. Technical plan.

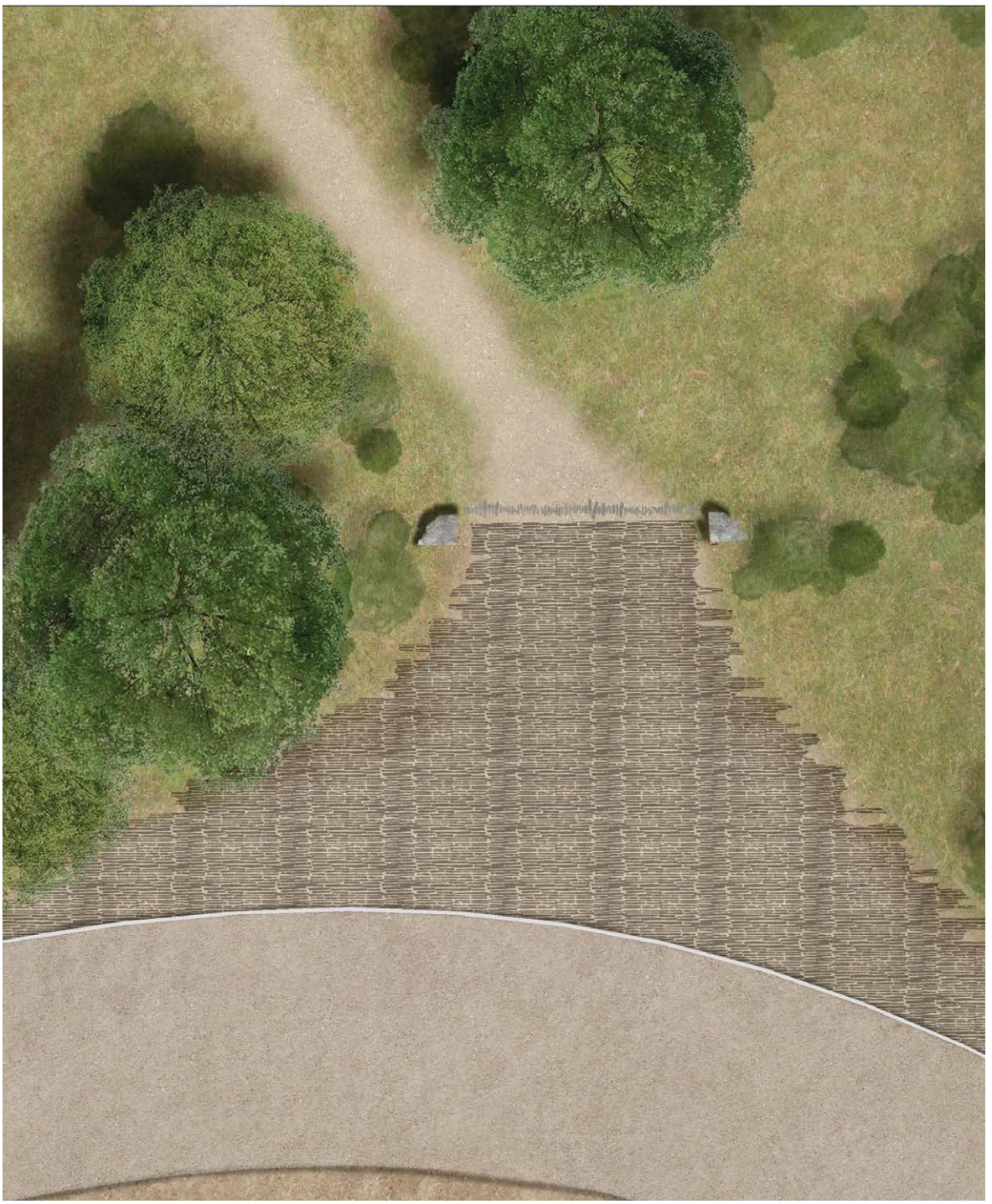


Figure 4.17 – Lower Gate. Environmental setting.

Intervention N.2 *The Panoramic Viewpoint*

Figure 4.18 – Panoramic Viewpoint. Photo of the current state.

The Lëngarica Canyon is a place of undisputed landscape value. Located between Section 1 and Section 2 of the path is a small clearing where, making space among the wild vegetation, you can enjoy a prime view of the canyon and Kadiu Bridge and the surrounding mountain range. [Fig. 4.18]

In order to take advantage of this, the project involves the construction of a staircase-viewpoint: a light-weight architectural structure that introduces an element of 'diversity' into the landscape, affording a better view of the surroundings and thereby enriching the experiential dimension of the place. The creation of the panoramic viewpoint requires minimal preliminary work to thin out the vegetation and checks on the stability of the escarpment where the foundations of the structure are to be placed. [Figs. 4.19 - 4.23]

In this case too, the Node is anticipated by a threshold (T3.1), with the characteristics described in intervention S.3.

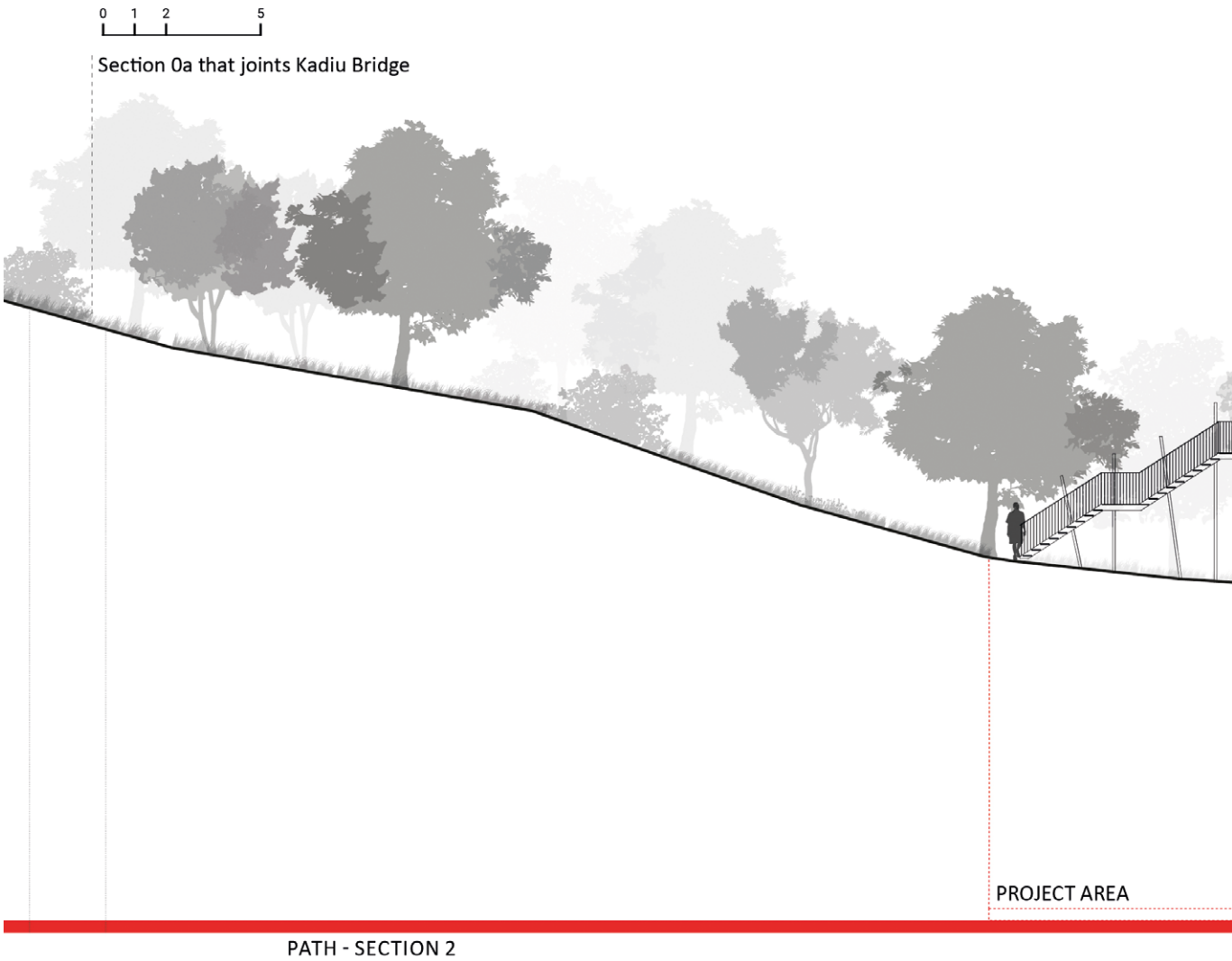


Figure 4.19 – Panoramic Viewpoint. Environmental section.

BROADLEAF WOOD

Figure 4.20 – Panoramic Viewpoint. The staircase.

The staircase-viewpoint is a small architectural structure consisting of three flights of ten steps each, rising from the path to a height of about 5 m and above the vegetation to the point where the landscape opens up to provide a view.[15] With one's back to the path, the small terrace at the top of the staircase provides an unexpected view of Kadiu Bridge and the Lëngarica Canyon, with the imposing Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë Mountain Range in the background.

The staircase, with side stringers, has landings wider than the steps, which accommodate small wooden seats, thereby creating snug resting spaces. The structure is made of steel, composed of slender inclined pillars that grip the body of the staircase like fragile crutches. To emphasise this suspension effect, the first ramp overhangs the vertical structure so that the first step is suspended from the ground.

[15] The elevation, the positioning in axis with the view of Kadiu Bridge and the canyon and, above all, the final height of the staircase can be redefined after an accurate survey of the area.

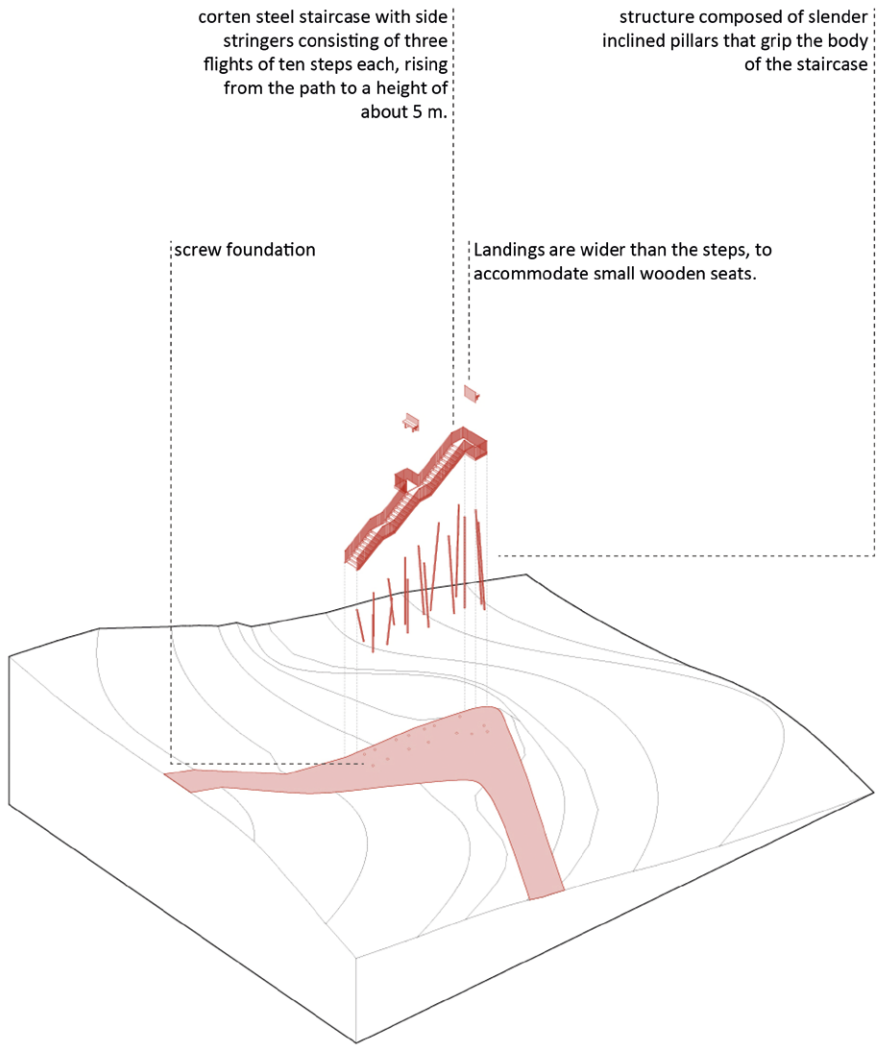


Figure 4.21 – Panoramic Viewpoint. Axonometric cross-section.

The staircase is placed on a sharp bend in the path, with the flights arranged orthogonally to the lower section of the path and parallel to the upper section. Arriving from the Lower Gate, visitors will first glimpse the overhanging final landing, and only when approaching the Node will they see the entire structure. In order to reach the first step, located at the highest part of the Node so as to follow the natural slope of the terrain, the visitor will have to go around the bend. From here, the staircase invites the visitor to ascend, by means of flights that 'mirror' the route of the path.

Continuing uphill, shortly after the Panoramic Viewpoint, the route forks. The left-hand path continues to Bënjë, while the right-hand fork leads to Kadiu Bridge via a much more arduous route, which is currently characterised by major disruptions caused by the lack of water regimentation (Section 0.b). It is therefore important to emphasise that Node B is also a potential gateway to the path for those coming from the thermal bath area.

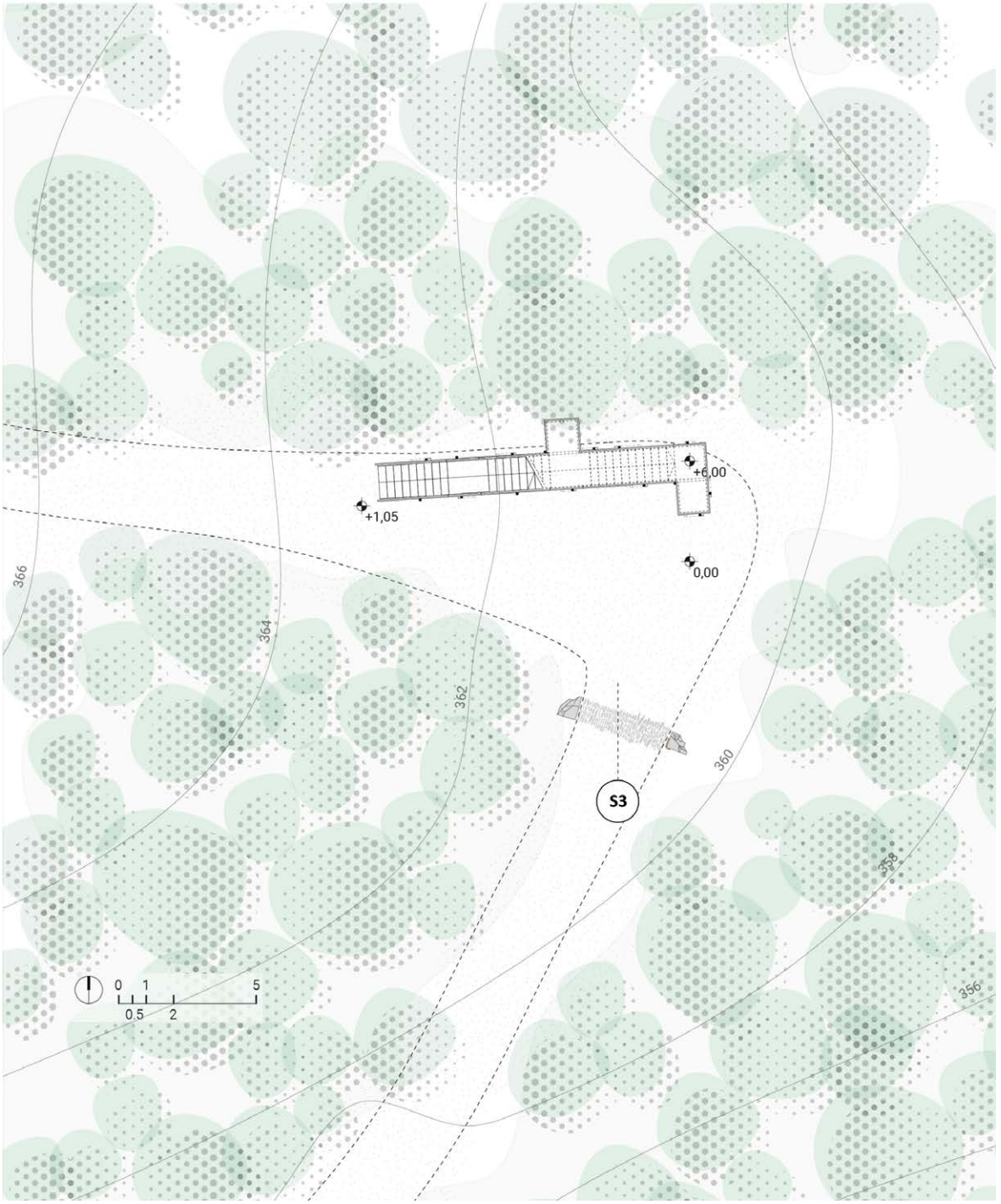


Figure 4.22 – Panoramic Viewpoint. Technical plan.

Figure 4.23 – Panoramic Viewpoint. Environmental setting.

Intervention N.3 *The Observatory*

Figure 4.24 – Observatory. Photo of the current state.

The Observatory is a stop almost halfway along the path. Its landscape is diverse both in terms of orography and in the composition of the rich landscape mosaic, typical of the Bredhi i Hotovës-Dangëlli National Park and neighbouring valleys. [Fig. 4.24]

The project area, the largest one encountered along the path, is a strip of gently sloping secondary grassland that offers a very broad, almost 360°, panoramic view of the main range on the hydrographical left of the Vjosa River, the Lëngarica Valley and the Bënjë Valley. [Figs. 4.26-29] It was therefore decided to intervene with a few light-weight signs capable of directing the gaze to points of particular interest through the placement of information elements, conceived as simple sculptural objects.

With the aim of inducing the traveller's curiosity to depart from the main route and divert to seize the opportunity to enrich their experience of the valley's landscape, the project envisages the creation of a small rest area, at the threshold (S.3), which, as with all the other Nodes, marks the proximity of a point of interest along the route. This includes two wooden seats (S.4) and the planting of a tree, a medium-sized *Quercus trojana Webb*. From here, a path leads to the panoramic terrace, marked only by the presence of local stone slabs (Albanera type), with irregular shapes and variable sizes, dry-laid into the ground. This path approaching the Observatory should maintain its irregular edges and a casual, natural conformation.

The Observatory, which can be reached from the narrow road described above, is a circular platform about 30 m in diameter, which invites visitors to look out over the surrounding panorama, at the point with the greatest visual opening over the Lëngarica Valley. The circumference bordering the platform is made up of irregularly shaped stones. Taking into account the natural morphology of the land, in order to create a flat area, the project proposes a modest earth fill, supported by a dry-stone retaining wall. Near the end of the narrow path, the retaining wall recedes into the ground, while on the opposite side, it reaches a maximum height of 60 cm, turning into a bench on which one can sit to observe the view.

In the centre of the platform a large stone represents the origin of a system of information elements that highlight the visual relationships between the site and the surrounding landscape. From this centre, virtual rays intercept specific components of the landscape: at the intersections of these rays with the stone circle information elements explain what can be seen in that direction. This creates a circular map that helps visitors

to orient themselves and get to know the landscape in which they are immersed. The elements are eight small totems made of shaped corten steel plates, anchored by means of brackets to concrete supports embedded in the drywall section. The two totem poles in the direction of the Lëngarica canyon and the village of Bënjë are an exception, being made of stone. Table 4.8 provides a description of each of these "landscape figures", which are the only vertical elements of the Observatory. Like the other vertical elements placed along the path, they are conceived as slender figures with simple geometries that, when viewed from afar, fade into the landscape. [Tab. 4.8 and Fig. 4.25]

Table 4.8 Description of the eight landscape figures.

No.	FIGURES	DESCRIPTION
1	Central stone	Large boulder occupying the geometric centre of the circumference and reminiscent of the *Guri i Qytetit* (City Stone) in Përmet. The stone measures approximately 200 x 200 cm, with a height of no more than 150 cm.
2	Lëngarica Valley Canyon	This element consists of two shaped stones of human height (approximately 180 cm) placed one in front of the other, restricting the view of the canyon landscape.
3	Ogdunanit River Valley between the Kristotorit and Stanit Mountains	Corten steel plate on which the name of the valley to be reached is punched. The plate should be wide enough for the text to be easily read. Two 'L' brackets, also made of corten, anchor the slab to a concrete support embedded in the drywall.
4	Trebeshinë Dhëmbel dhe Nemërçkë Mountain Range	Inclined corten steel lectern positioned at a height of approximately 120 cm from the ground level. The upper edge of the plate has the outline of the mountain range it refers to, created by laser cutting. Perforated text indicates the main natural landmarks: the Maja and Dritës Peak (2485 metres a.s.l.), the Gryka and Kazanit Gorge (a national monument), and the Stërmbec Waterfall.
5	Bënjë Valley	As figure No. 3.
6	Mount Tremishtit	As figure No. 3.
7	Bënjë Village and Mount Fushës së Bardhë	A stone parallelepiped with a base of approx. 20 x 20 cm and a height of approx. 150 cm, on which a small corten slab is embedded, with a central hole through which the village of Bënjë can be seen. Behind the stone, a corten slab anchored to the ground shows the profile of Mount Fushës së Bardhë perforated on the surface. The two structures act as stage backdrops, re-proposing the overlapping layers of the landscape.
8	Mount Vinjaut	As figure No. 3.

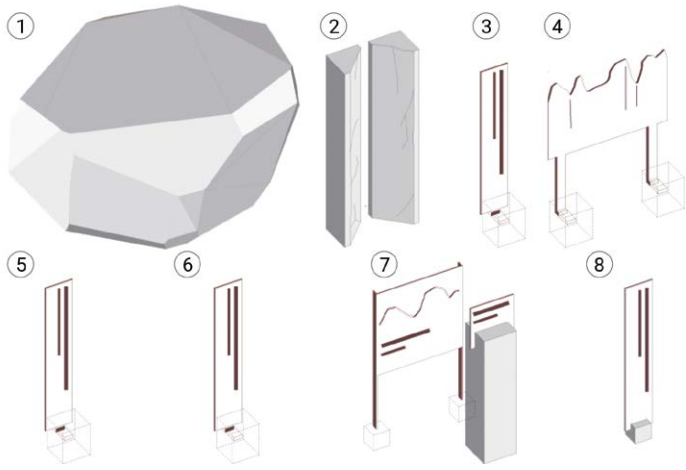
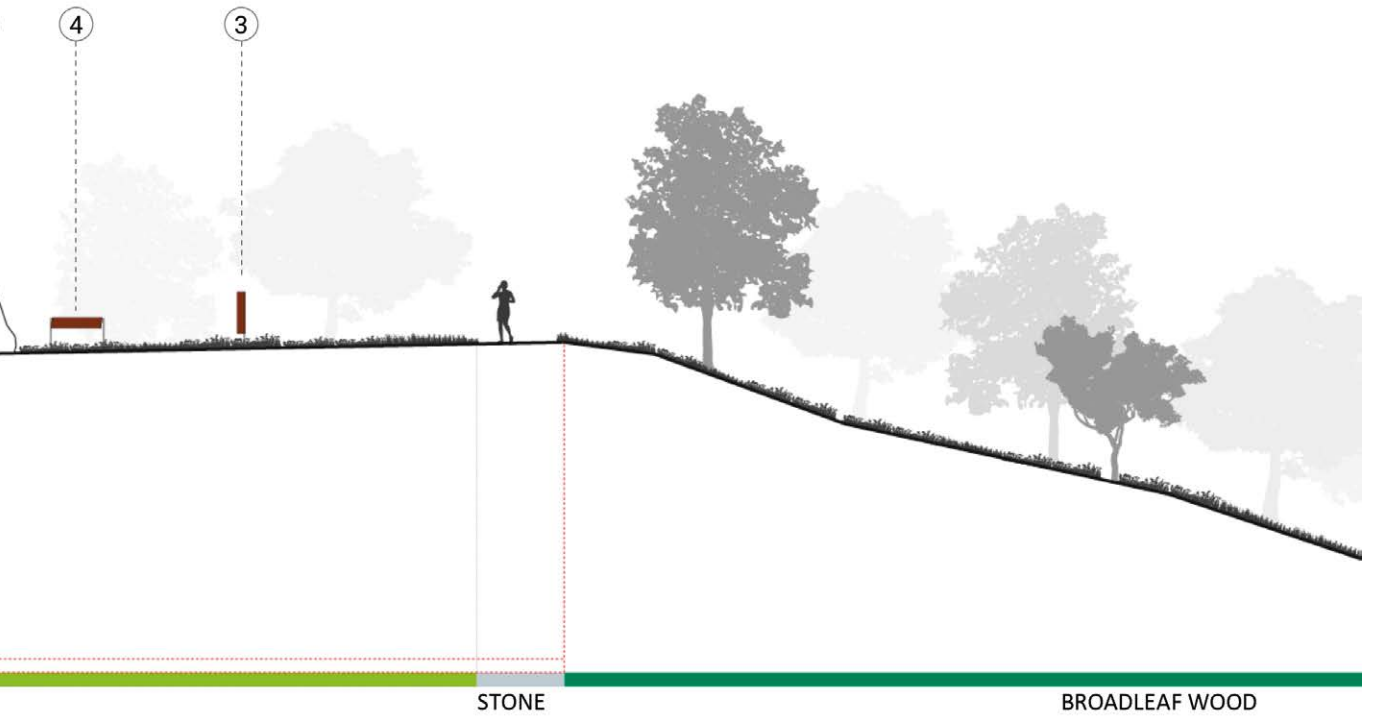
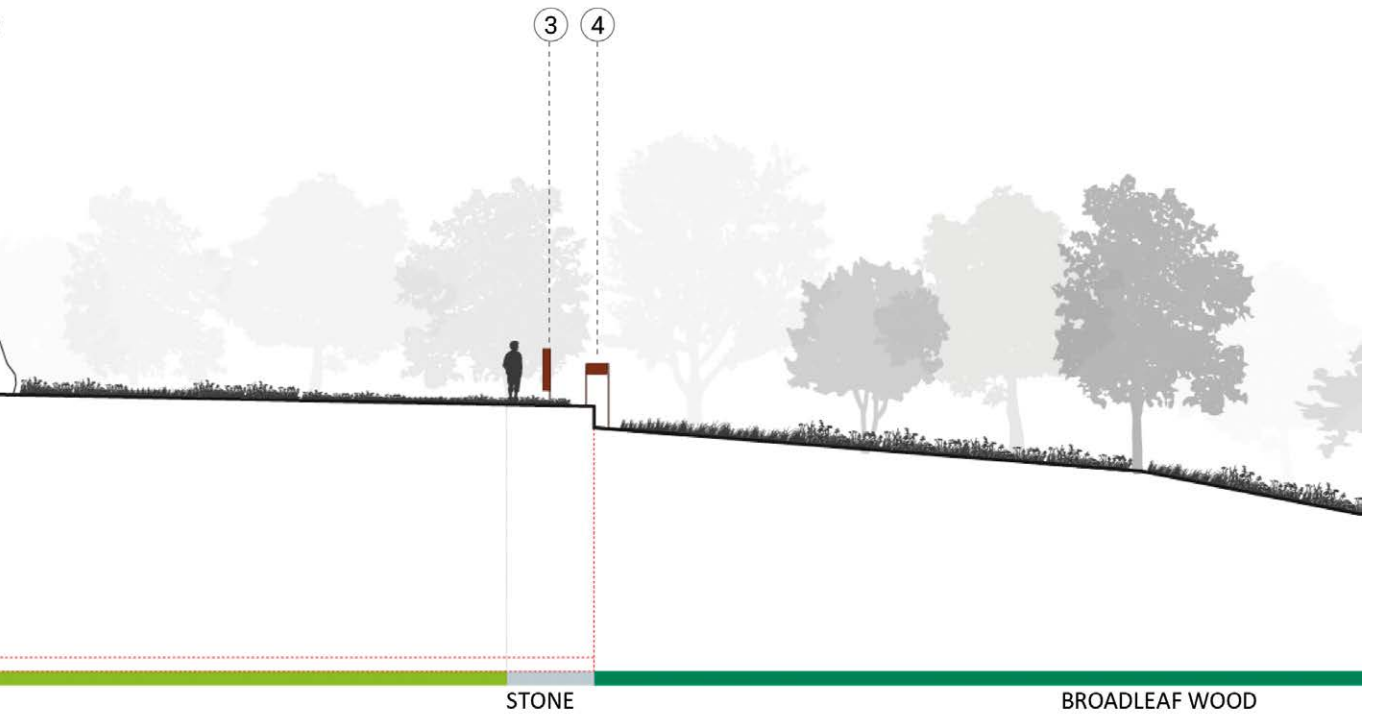


Figure 4.25 – Observatory. The eight figures of the landscape.

Figure 4.26 – The Observatory. Environmental sections.


4
3
STONE
BROADLEAF WOOD


3
4
STONE
BROADLEAF WOOD

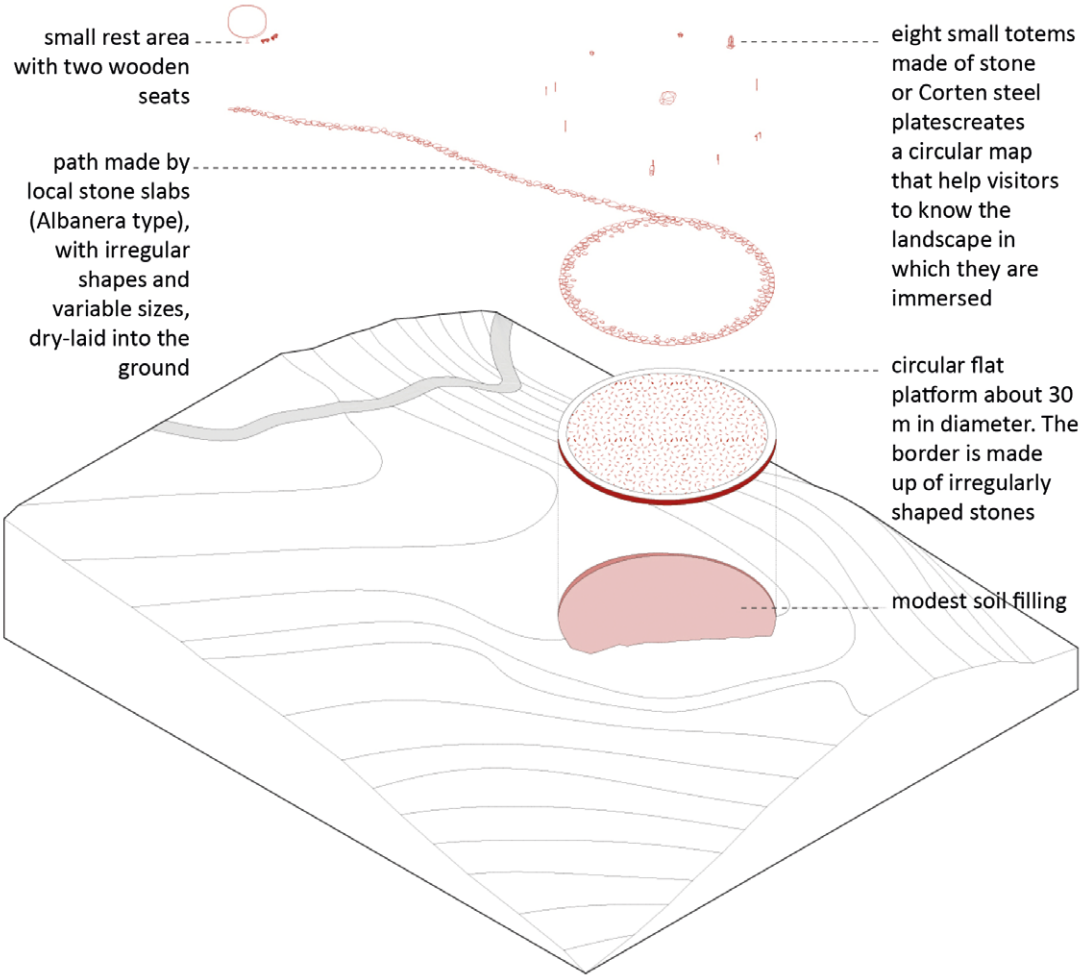


Figure 4.27 – Observatory. Axonometric cross-section.

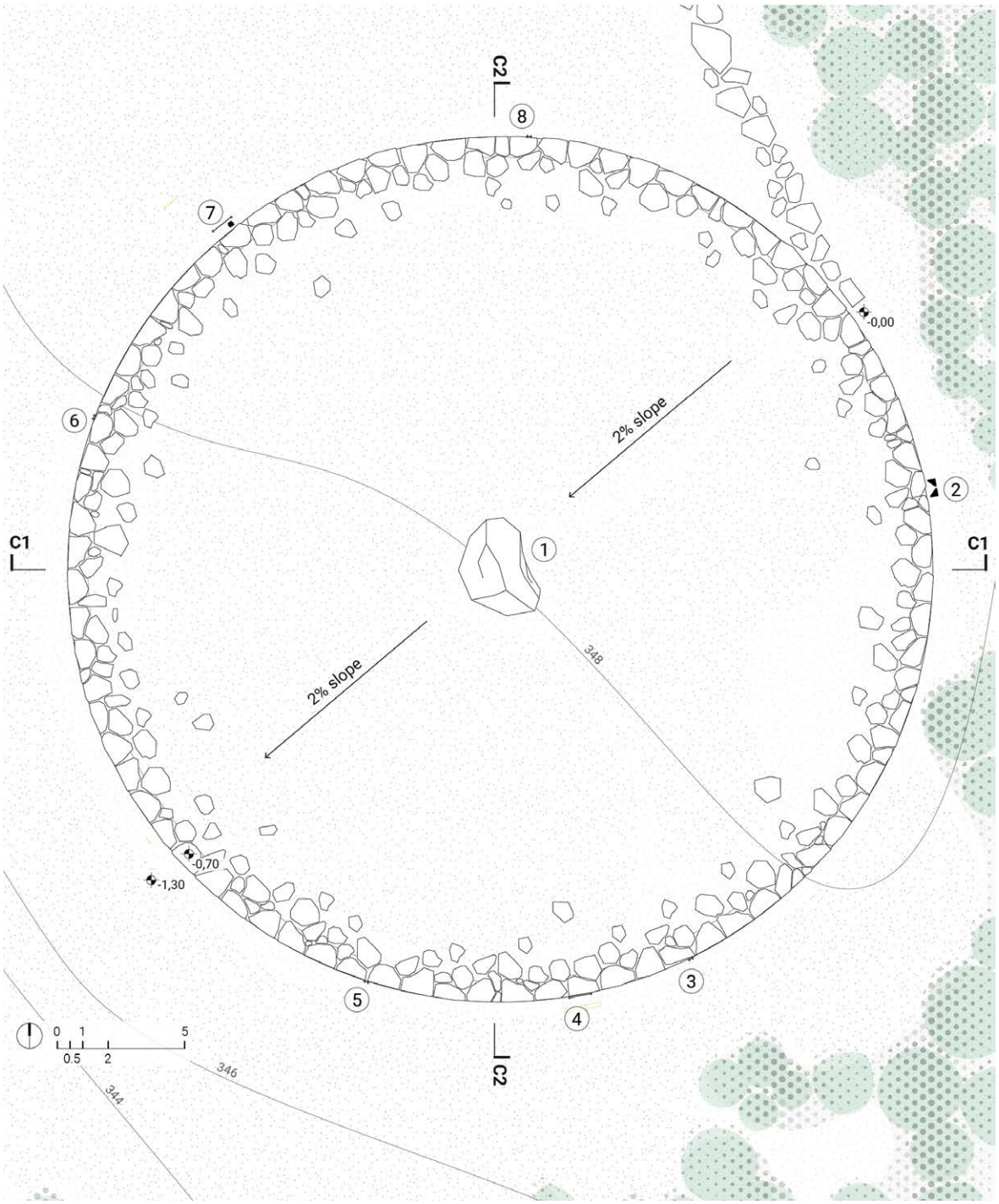


Figure 4.28 – Observatory. Technical plan.

Figure 4.29 – Observatory. Environmental setting.

Intervention N.4 The *Gypsy Square*

Figure 4.30 – Gypsy Square. Photo of the current state.

Gypsy Square is a large clearing downhill from the village of Bënjë. [Fig. 4.30] Unlike the other Nodes, it does not have any particularly noteworthy landscape features. It is, however, a place of identity where nomadic traders would converge, attracting buyers and onlookers also from the villages in the area (see chapter 2). Its story deserves to be told, and at the same time it enhances the strategic position of this stage of the route. Here, in fact, the path intercepts the other roads that can be taken to reach the village of Bënjë: the ancestral path to the east, now impassable except by experienced hikers, and the vehicle road to the west (Section 4b). From this clearing, it is also possible in the warmer months to ascend the bed of the Bënjë Stream (Section 4a) to rejoin the ancestral path at Bënjë Bridge and the beginning of Section 5.

The project intends to enhance the place without altering its image and, therefore, proposes the insertion of simple signage, some seats and an artistic installation consisting of four stone boulders, symbolically recalling the human presence in the place. [Figs. 4.31-4.33] These evocative figures are intended to recall the wealth of relationships that this place has witnessed in terms of social exchange and community life.

The shape and position of the clearing, about three-quarters of the way from the thermal baths, make it an ideal stopping and meeting point, which will have the type of benches described above (S.4). As a crossroads between different directions, it was also considered essential to upgrade the signage. Three boundary stones with information boards indicate: (1) the entrance to Node D along the main path, (2) the continuation of the historic route to the east, and (3) the possibility of reaching the village by crossing the riverbed or following the road to the west of the 'square'. As in previous cases, the entrance to the Node is marked by a threshold in *kalldrëm* (S.3).

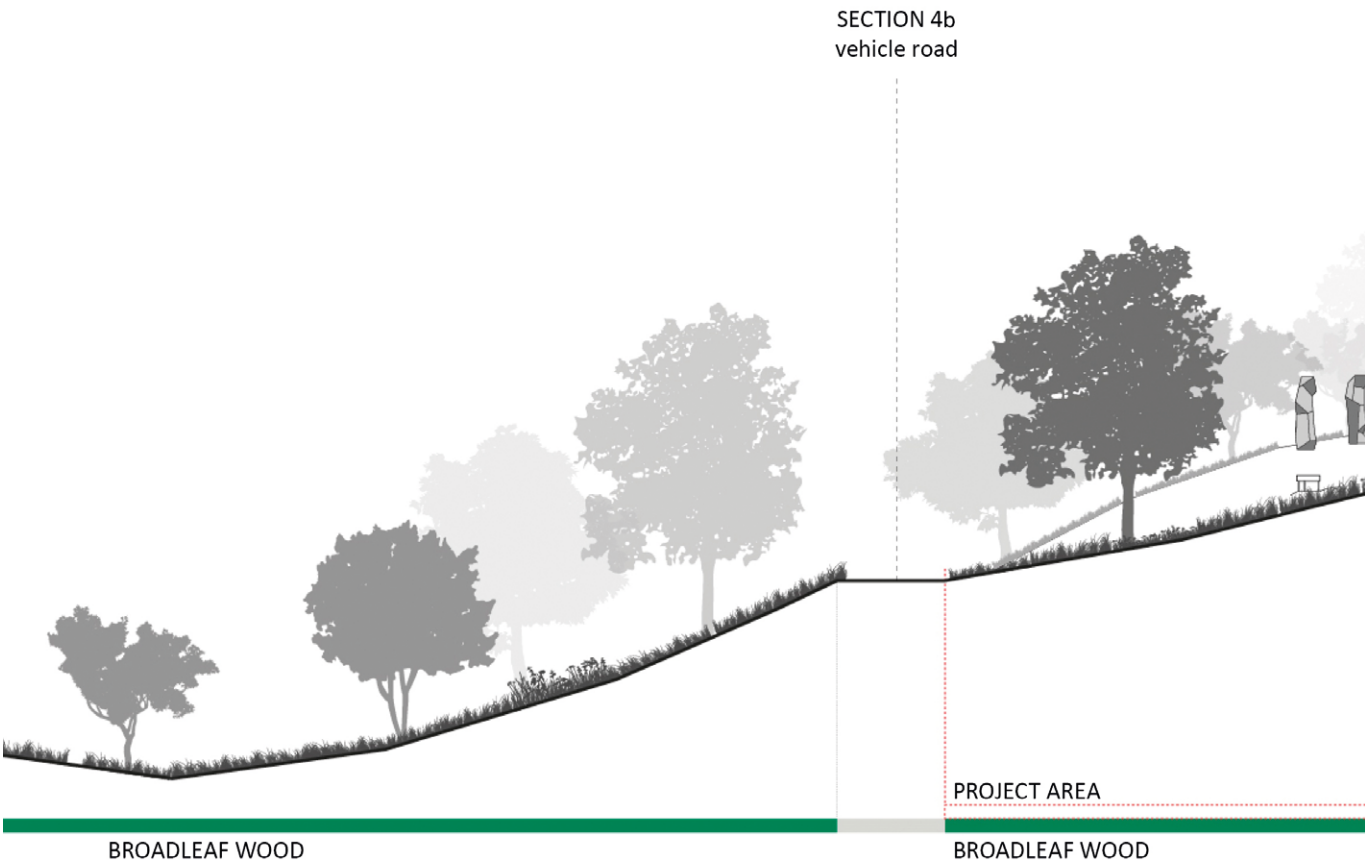
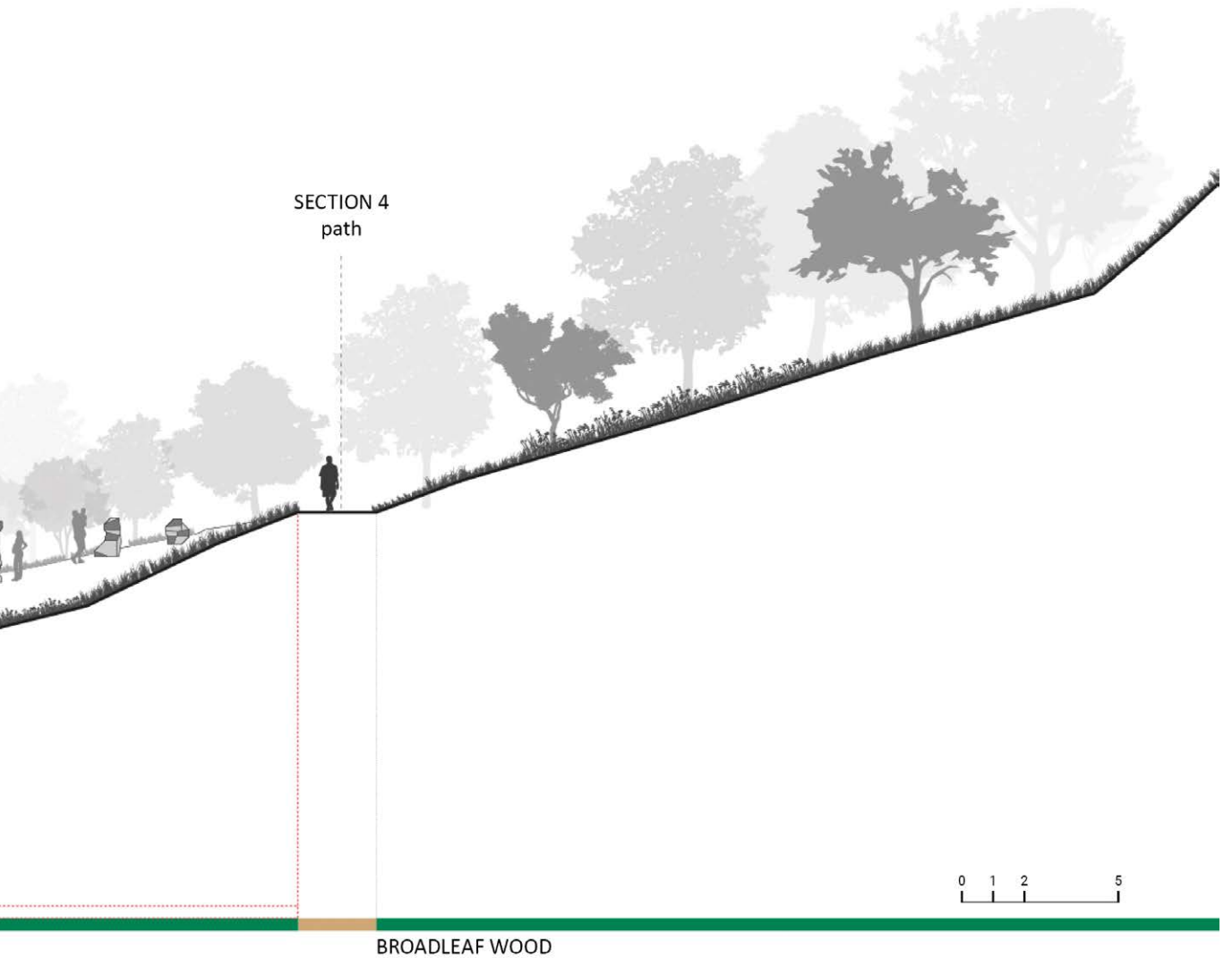


Figure 4.31 – Gypsy Square. Environmental section.


SECTION 4
path
0 1 2 5
BROADLEAF WOOD

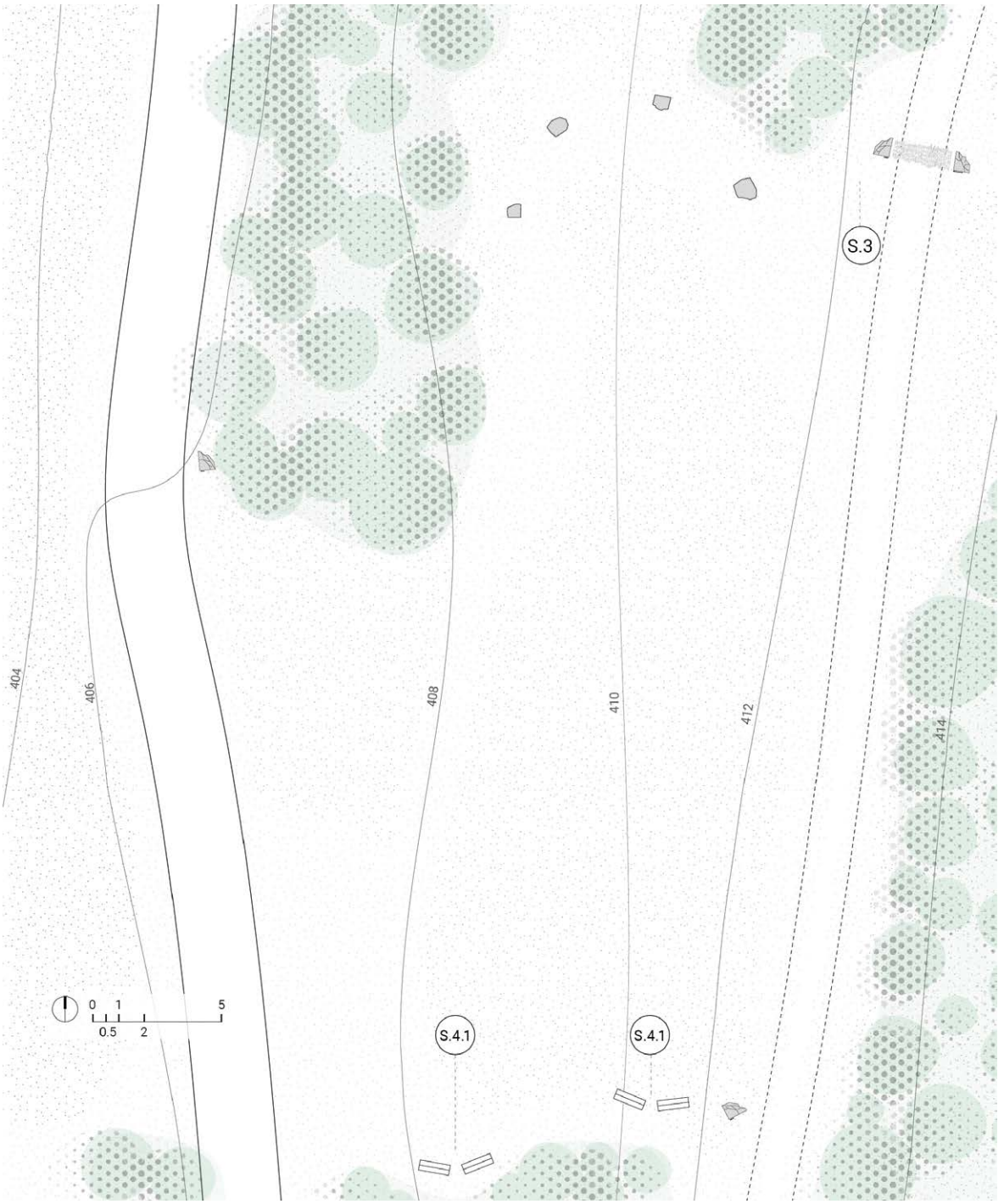


Figure 4.32 – Gypsy Square. Technical plan.

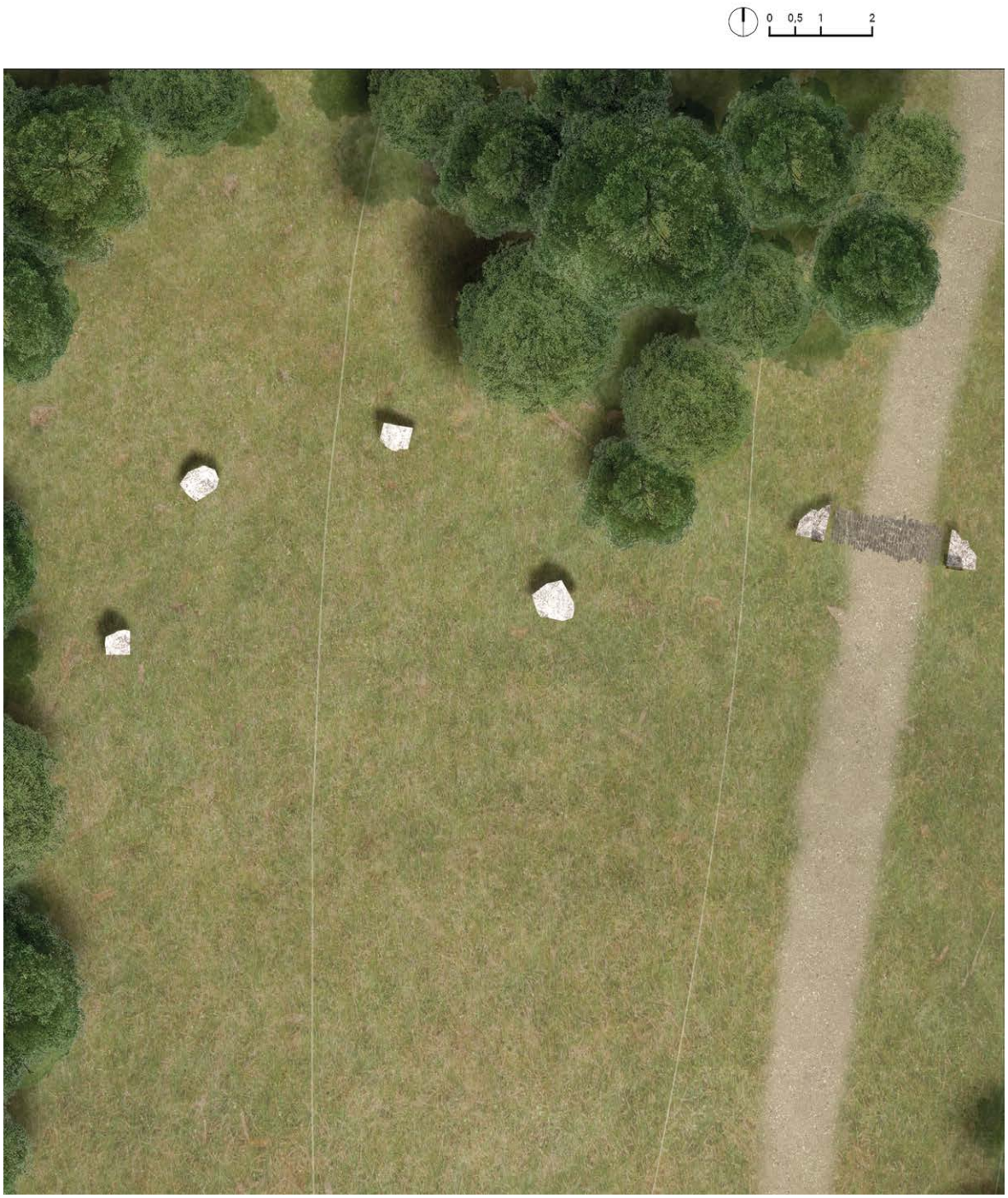


Figure 4.33 – Gypsy Square. Environmental setting.

4.3 The outdoor spaces of St Mary's Church

Francesco Alberti, Mirko Romagnoli

4.3.1 Introduction

The path project described so far ends with its arrival in Bënjë (Node F). The Upper Gate of the path is located on the eastern edge of the village, along the vehicle road, where St Mary's Architectural Complex stands. The complexity of the system of open spaces around the church suggested that their redesign should be considered as an autonomous functional lot, Lot 3 (see § 4.1).

In the absence of real squares, the spaces around the church have historically played a prominent role in the public life of the village as a gathering place. The area, surrounded to the north by a crown of centuries-old cypress trees, opens onto the picturesque scenery of the Lëngarica Valley. [Fig. 4.34] In addition to the landscape values are those of the buildings that form the architectural complex, among which the post-Byzantine Church of St Mary, dating from the 19th century, stands out (see § 2.3.1).

Figure 4.34 – View of the Lëngarica Valley from the east parvis of St Mary's Church.

4.3.2 The state of the sites

The project for the exterior spaces of St Mary's Church mainly focuses on the east parvis and the adjoining spaces.

As a preliminary step, it was necessary to collect the morphometric information of the site and produce a planimetric-altimetric representation of it that was as accurate as possible. The state of the sites was reconstructed through an analysis of the maps available on the Albanian government's geoportal,[16] the photographic documentation and drawings made during the field work, orthophotogrammetry and the survey cam-

[16] See < https://geoportal.asig.gov.al/> (2024-02-26).

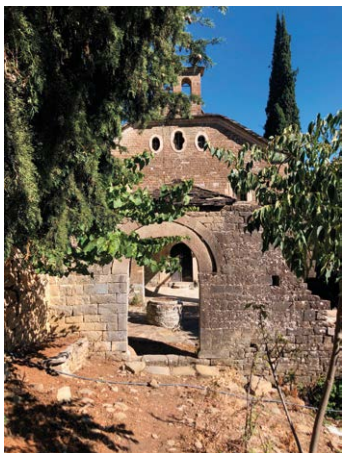


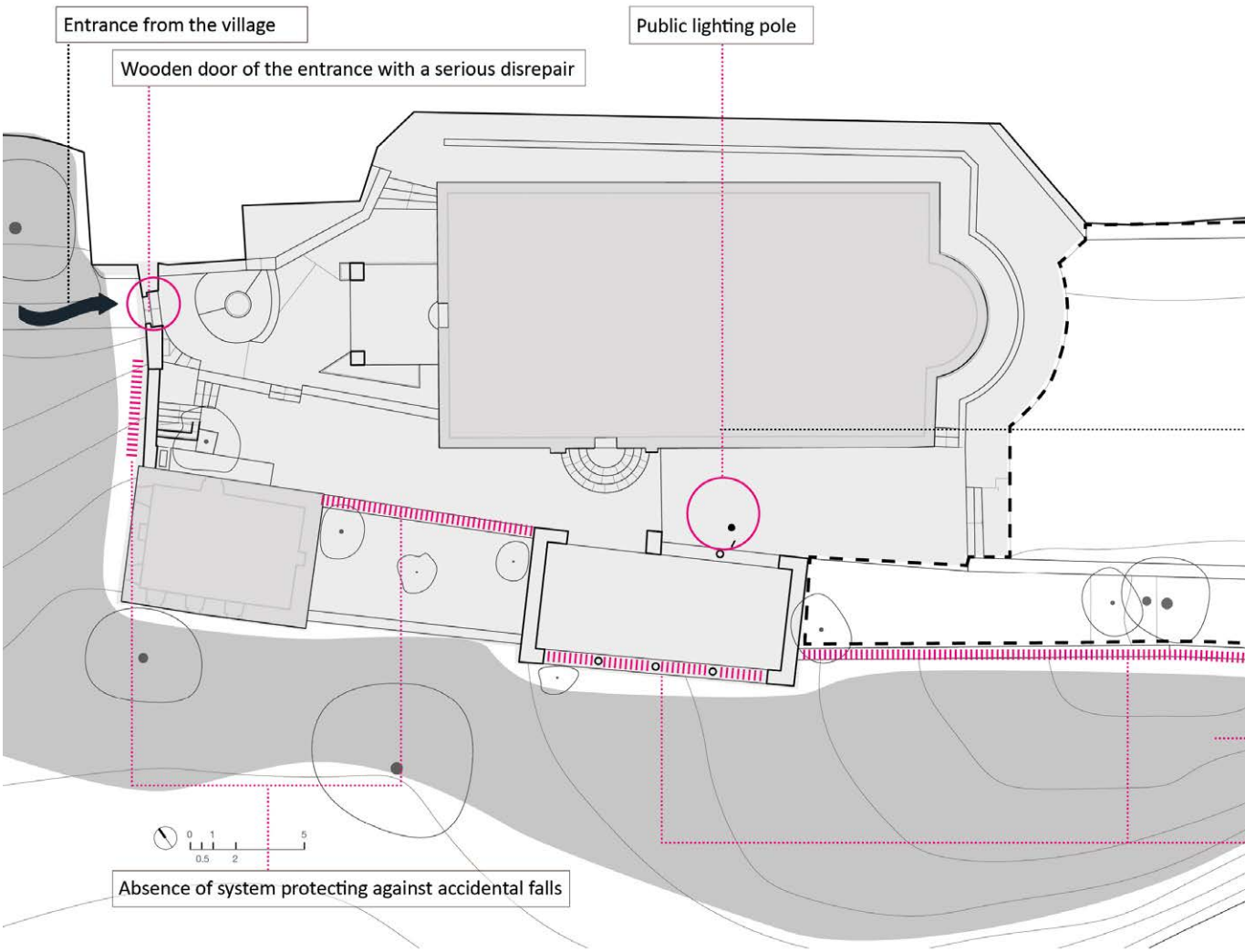
Figure 4.35 – The two entrances to the monumental complex: from the side of the village to the east *(left)* and from the side of the access road to the village, to the west *(right)*.

Figure 4.36 – Scree slopes around the entrance to the east parvis of St Mary's Church.

paigns carried out in October 2021 by the research team using laser distance meters, GPS detectors and barometric altimeters.[17]

The church is located about 500 m a.s.l., on a crag on the south side of the mountain. The area is delimited by the stone walls that, towards the valley, form the terracing on which the monumental complex sits and, uphill, by the wall that supports the land accommodating, at a higher level, the small village cemetery. It can be accessed on the west side through a stone gate, which is the entrance from the village to the parvis in front of the church. Moreover, on the opposite side, a wider opening of about 3 metres provides access to the east parvis, which can be accessed from the road, dom-

[17] The preliminary design is based on an outline survey. It will be necessary to conduct a detailed site survey before the working drawing is drafted.



inated by the apse of St Mary's Church. [Fig. 4.35] On the south side, the east parvis directly overlooks the valley; a further view is offered by a terrace at a lower elevation. Continuing along the same side of the church, there is the *hajat* – a traditional porch used as a gathering place by the community – also open to the landscape. Further on, at the west parvis, the view of the valley is closed off by the stone building formerly housing the village school (see § 2.3.1). All around, the mountainside descends steeply on scree slopes. [Fig. 4.36]

Having defined the cartographic base, an accurate survey of the site led to the identification of both the critical factors and the potential to be taken into account in the project, represented in two separate drawings.

With regard to the critical aspects [Fig. 4.37], the most important ones concern the state of preservation of the external retaining walls, which are largely deformed by swelling and affected by partial collapses; the crests of the walls are also almost com-

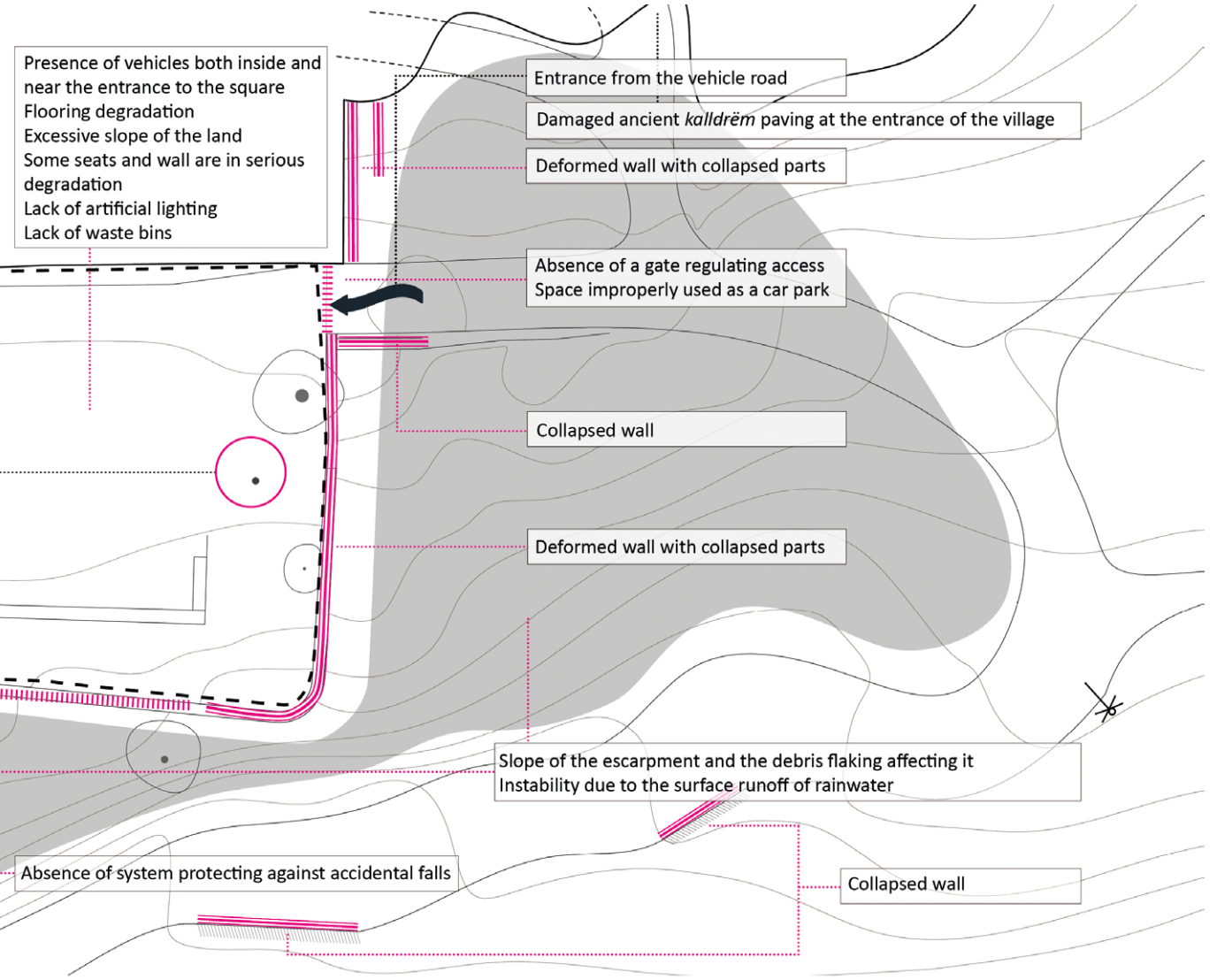


Figure 4.37 – Analysis of the critical issues of the external spaces of St Mary's Church.

pletely crumbled. [Fig. 4.36] The perimeter walls overhanging the valley provide no protection against falls; the use of the open spaces around the church therefore poses safety problems. In the absence of a gate regulating access, the east parvis is improperly used as a car park. The wooden portal of the west entrance is severely deteriorated and therefore in need of restoration or, more likely, replacement. The incongruous presence of two reinforced concrete utility poles is also noteworthy, placed respectively in front of the arches of the *hajat*, and next to the large cypress tree by the east entrance. [Fig. 4.36] The terrace down from the apsidal area is currently not accessible and its retaining walls are unsafe.

Another issue to be considered in the design, is the downward slope of the east parvis floor, which ranges from 3 to 8.5%. Moreover, this area, unlike the west parvis and the space connecting the church and the *hajat*, does not have a stone pavement, but a gravel surface.

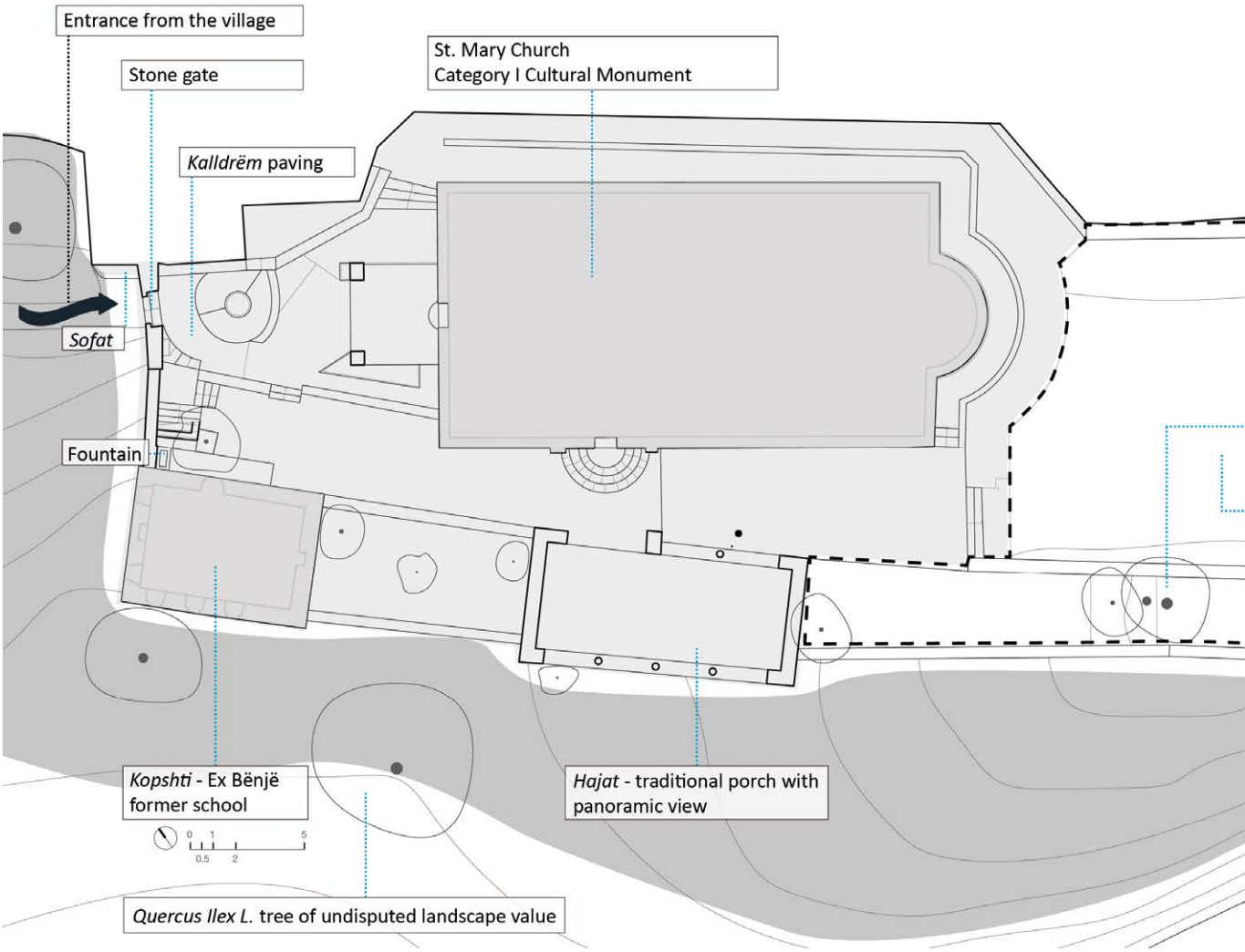
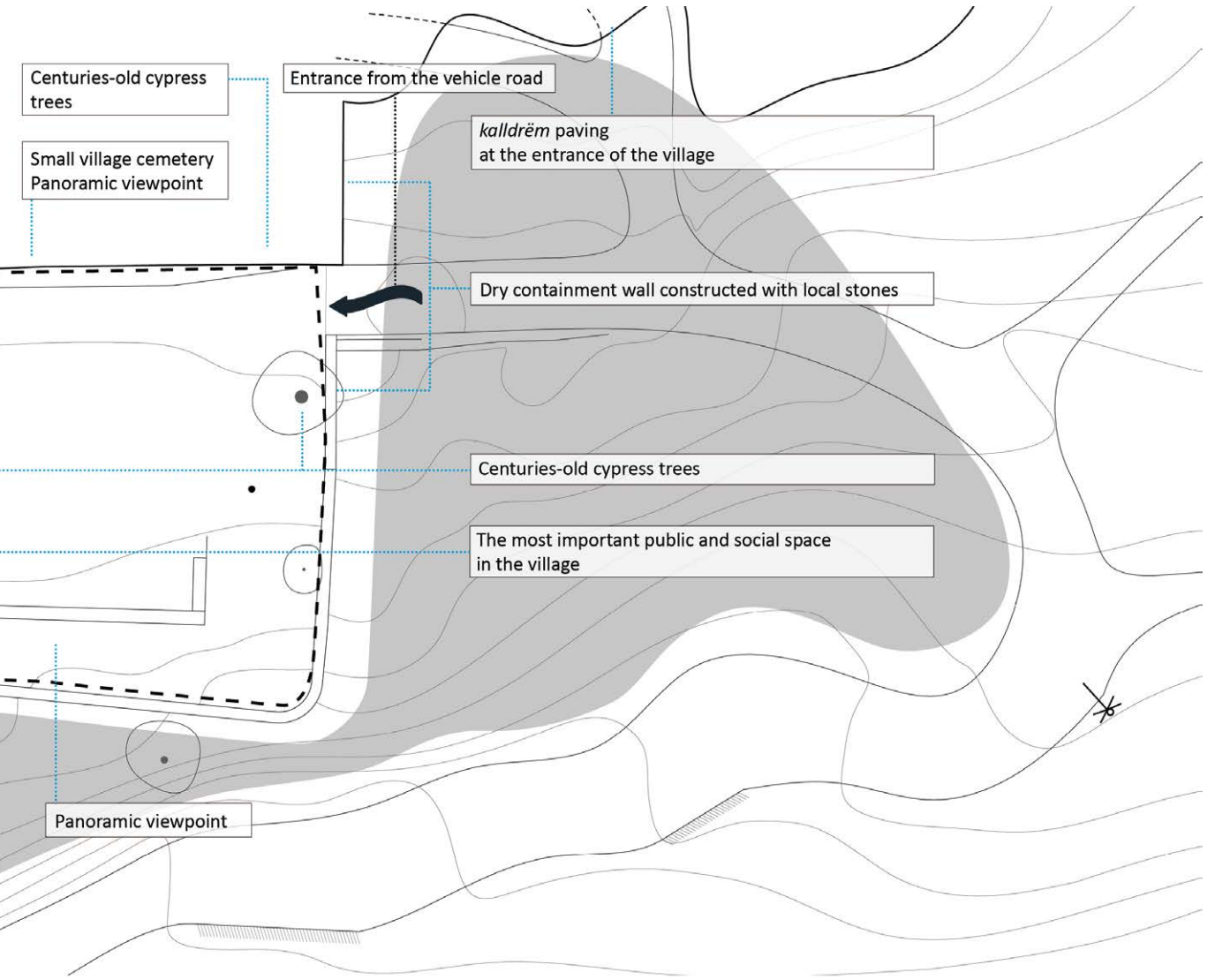


Figure 4.38 – Analysis of the potential of the external spaces of St Mary's Church.

The table of potential [Fig. 4.38] notes, on the contrary, the strengths and characteristics to be enhanced. The role historically played in village life, the spatial layout, the architectural elements, the elevation changes and terracing, the retaining walls, the centuries-old cypress trees, and the view of the valley all combine to make St Mary's Architectural Complex an evocative place of high cultural and scenic value (see § 2.3.1).

The area surrounding the church is also rich in details related to the culture of the place and the traditional use of space, such as the well in the centre of the west parvis, the small stone seat *(sofat)* near the church entrance [Fig. 4.35] and the longer one at the foot of the cemetery wall. [Fig. 4.39]

The analysis of the current state was followed by the definition of design guidelines concerning maintenance of the exterior spaces to the west and south of the church and the redevelopment of the large east parvis, which, in the overall strategy of enhancing



the Bënjë territory developed in this research, represents the "Upper Gate" of the path coming from the thermal baths.

These guidelines, also carefully detailed in a *narrative master plan,* follow certain general principles that can be summarised as follows:

- Integration with the architectural and natural context;
- *Site-specific* design and furniture solutions aimed at recovering the material culture of the place;
- Enhancement of local resources, both in terms of traditional materials and execution techniques and the craftsmen able to use them:
- Compliance with existing village protection regulations.

On the basis of the indications gathered in the *narrative master plan*, the preliminary project for the redevelopment of the exterior spaces of St Mary's Church was drawn up.

4.3.3 The narrative master plan

As indicated in § 4.1.3, the design actions of the narrative master plan prepared in order to guide the redevelopment of the external spaces of St Mary's Church were divided into two intervention categories - (1) *Conservative Interventions* and (2) *Enhancement Interventions*. [Fig. 4.41]

Conservation Interventions (C) include the actions necessary to secure and restore the construction elements of the external spaces of the architectural complex. In particular, this involves recovering degraded artefacts, those subject to collapse and instability, and reconstructing the collapsed or deformed parts of the retaining wall.

Enhancement Interventions (V), on the other hand, aim to emphasise the scenic-architectural qualities and functional characteristics that express the potential of the place, improving its usability, safety of use and attractiveness. The project proposal designs a new equipped public space that can act as a new social and tourist catalyst thanks to the improvements made.

The interventions described in the narrative master plan are divided into three areas:

1. East parvis (adjacent to the church apse)
2. Parvis on the west and south sides (areas adjoining the church façade, the former school and the *hajat*)
3. Areas outside the architectural complex.

There are also 'widespread' works, i.e. covering all the spaces outside the church.

In addition to the restoration of the perimeter wall of the complex, this category includes the removal of existing utility poles, the burying of electrical cables, and the installation of waste bins. [Tables 4.9-4.12]

Figure 4.39 – The stone seat of the east parvis at the base of the cemetery retaining wall.

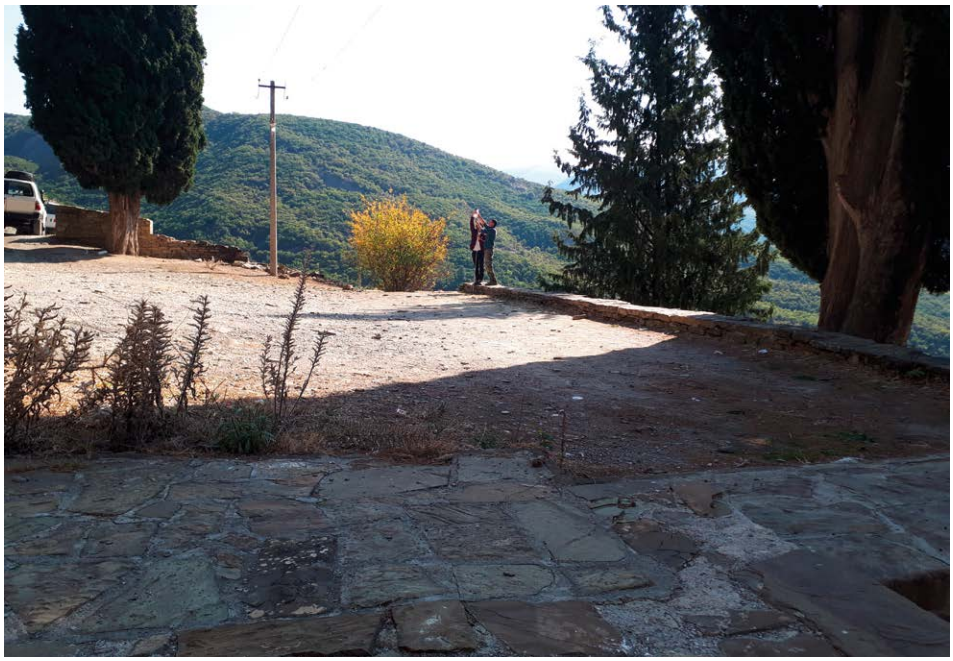


Figure 4.40 – View of the east parvis with the village public lighting pole.

Table 4.9 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 3 for the part concerning widespread interventions.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
C1	**Removal of existing utility poles**
	In the outdoor areas of the monumental complex, there are two village street lighting poles made of vibrated reinforced concrete, which are not only in very poor condition, but also visually disturbing. They must therefore be removed and the electricity system placed underground. [Fig. 4.40]
C2	**Consolidation of retaining walls and drystone walls**
	The most important interventions include the reconstruction of the crests of the walls with the addition of the missing parts to a height appropriate for the new heights of the terraces. [Fig. 4.2] These interventions must include the partial demolition and reconstruction of existing masonry, or, in general, the securing of deformed or unstable masonry. Similarly, the partially collapsed dry stone walls along the main access routes to the area are to be reconstructed. Before drafting the working drawing, further investigations will be necessary to assess in detail the extent and exact location of this type of intervention.
C3	**Restoration of the cemetery wall and work to repair the crests of the walls**
	The outer wall that runs along the east side of the cemetery near the entrance to St Mary's Complex shows significant deformations. Once the causes of the problem have been established, the wall needs to be made safe by reconstructing the deformed parts using traditional materials and techniques.
V1	**Installation of waste bins**
	The litter bins will preferably be made by local craftsmen from traditional materials. In order not to create a visual disturbance, they will be positioned outside of the main spaces, i.e. on the terrace down from the east parvis and near the entrances.

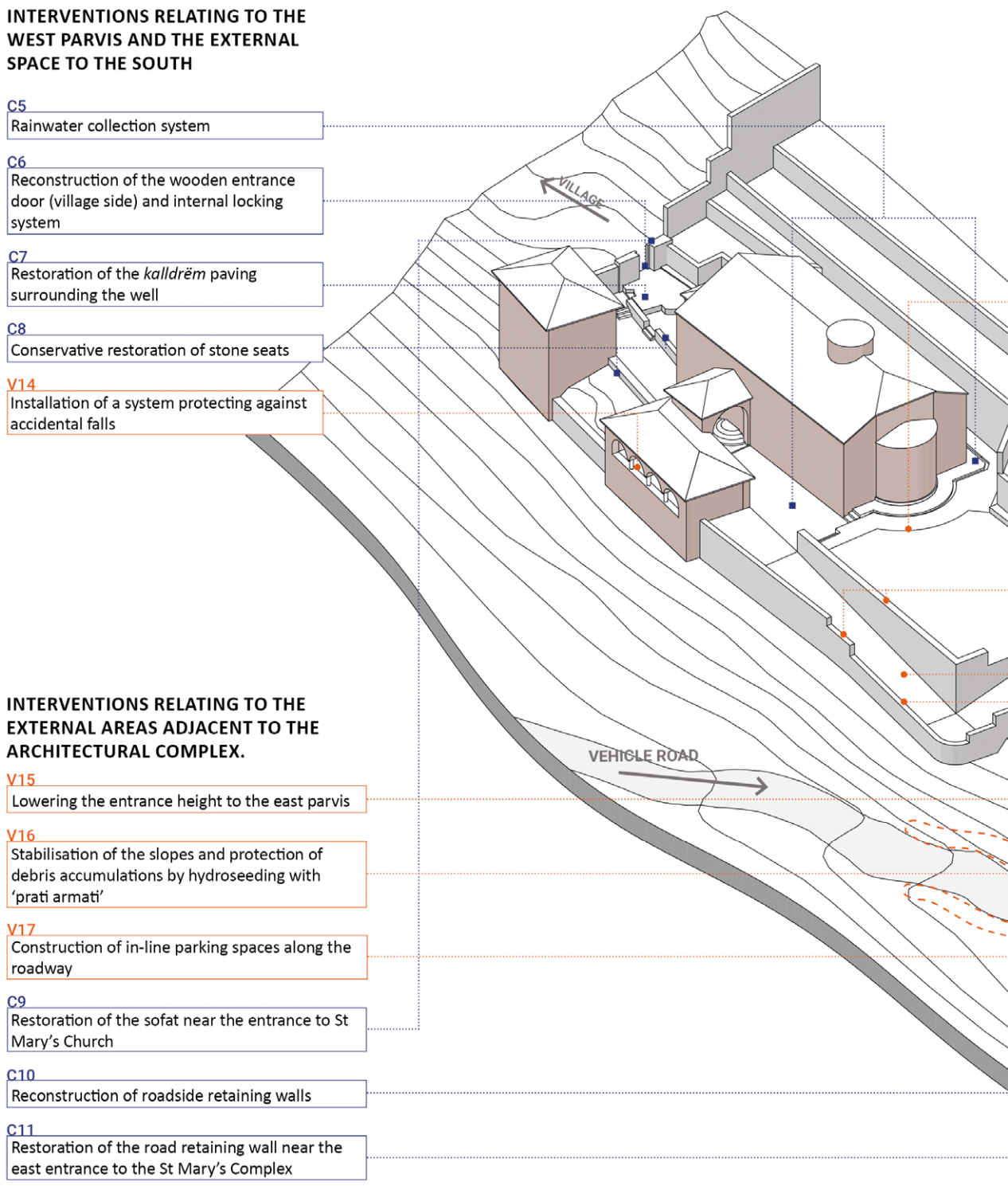
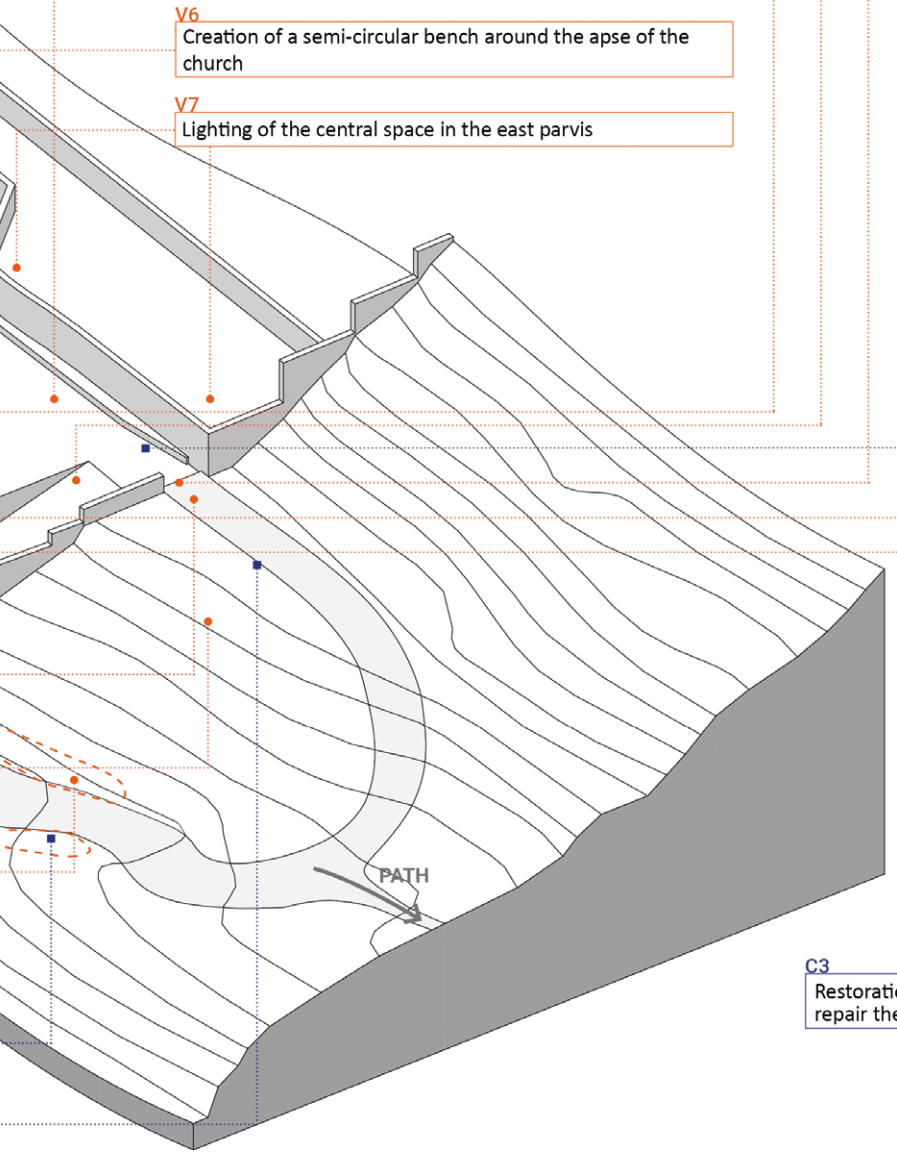


Figure 4.41 – Synoptic overview of the *conservation* (C) and *enhancement* (V) interventions of the narrative master plan for Lot 3.



EAST PARVIS INTERVENTIONS

V2
New floor modelling of the external areas to the east and south of the church

V3
Installation of new rainwater collection systems

V4
Paving of the square and valley terracing

V5
Lighting with recessed circular spotlights

V6
Creation of a semi-circular bench around the apse of the church

V7
Lighting of the central space in the east parvis

V8
Wall integrations

V9
Creation of a cordonata to connect the east parvis level with the downhill terracing

V10
Construction of a gate to regulate access to the square

V11
Construction of paving using loose aggregate material in the downstream terracing

V12
Soil filling to reduce the difference in height between the square and the downhill terracing

V13
Equipment for the seating area

C4
Restoration of the masonry bench at the foot of the cemetery wall

WIDESPREAD INTERVENTIONS

V1
Installation of waste bins

C1
Removal of existing utility poles

C2
Consolidation of retaining walls and drystone walls

C3
Restoration of the cemetery wall and work to repair the crests of the walls

Conservation Interventions C

Enhancement Interventions V

Table 4.10 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 3: work on the east parvis.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
C4	**Restoration of the masonry bench at the foot of the cemetery wall**
	The intervention includes the restoration of missing and/or degraded parts.
V2	**New floor modelling of the external areas to the east and south of the church**
	The project involves reducing the slope of the east parvis floor, which is currently very pronounced (8.5%), by dividing it into two parts, with the upper part having a relatively steeper slope (5%) and the lower part being almost flat (1.5%). This can be achieved by slightly lowering the upper level (by 5 to 10 cm) and raising the lower level by approximately 100 cm. On the other hand, the side strip at the stairs joining the east parvis to the space in front of the *hajat* will have a slope of around 2%.
V3	**Installation of new rainwater collection systems**
	In the new layout of the east parvis, the rainwater runoff, facilitated by the slope of the walking surface, is managed by two different collection systems. In the upper part, the water is intercepted by a slot drain with a channel invisible from the outside. On the lower side, where the slope is not so steep and the water loads lower, there is a roadside gutter. By means of a system of connecting channels, the two collection systems carry the water to the lower terracing, which has a permeable surface.
V4	**Paving of the east parvis and valley terracing**
	Semi-permeable paving to facilitate rainwater drainage is planned for the east parvis, made of small irregular elements of the same local stone already used in the west parvis of the church, laid on a bed of stabilised earth. The terracing down from the east parvis will maintain a permeable surface with loose aggregates, obtained by crushing the same local stone.
V5	**Lighting with recessed circular spotlights**
	The paving described in item V3 for the east parvis and the terracing below will be supplemented by a lighting system consisting of recessed circular spotlights, appropriately positioned to mark the steps and the project cordonata.
V6	**Creation of a semi-circular bench around the apse of the church**
	The change in the levels of the east parvis makes it necessary to connect it with the paving of the spaces behind the church, which were recently restored (2018). This connection is achieved, to the south, by means of a seven-step staircase replacing the existing three-step staircase. Adjacent to the steps, a bench that follows the curved course of the paving around the apse will provide a safe delimitation of the slight height difference between the two pavings. This also means that all four sides of the east parvis will have stone seating. Both the steps and the bench are to be made of the same stone and using the same construction techniques as the pre-existing architectural elements.
V7	**Lighting of the central space in the east parvis**
	The work consists of installing a new lighting system with soft, warm lighting (not less than 3000 K) with lighting fixtures with diffusers directed towards the apse and the central space of the east parvis located on the crest of the cemetery boundary wall.
V8	**Wall integrations**
	The project alters the height of the existing perimeter walls to a limited extent. The new configuration of the east parvis requires the retaining walls to be raised to the project level of the walking surface and further raised to act as parapets. This intervention is in addition to repairing the missing and deteriorated parts, which are everywhere, but are particularly bad in the portion of the wall supporting the terracing down from the parvis. The additions are to be made with the same materials and techniques used to build the existing parts of the wall.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
V9	**Creation of a cordonata to connect the east parvis level with the downhill terracing**
	In order to make the terrace at a level of approx. -230 cm from the east parvis safely accessible, a cordonata of 14 steps with a slightly inclined tread depth of 70 cm was planned. The steps have the same paving as the parvis and a riser of 8.5 cm made of Albanera sandstone elements arranged with the thin edge exposed, reminiscent of the *kalldrëm* construction technique. Along the retaining wall, the cordonata is flanked by an uncovered channel drain, into which the water from the parvis collection system is also channelled. At its base, there is also a channel drain covered with Albanera sandstone slabs. As in the collection system around the church, water flows between the open joints in the paving. Unlike that one, however, the drainage channel grate will be fitted with manholes to make maintenance easier.
V10	**Construction of a gate to regulate access to the east parvis**
	The opening to the square must be fitted with a gate in order to prevent, or otherwise regulate, vehicle access. The height must not exceed that of the adjacent wall (1.20 m), so it does not block the view of the church even when it is closed. The gate is to be made by local craftsmen using traditional materials and techniques. Bearing in mind that we are at the entrance to the monumental complex facing the path and the farmland at the foot of the village, it is proposed that the design should evoke traditional field boundary systems made of intertwined branches *(gardhi)*, thereby distinguishing it from the wooden gate that regulates the other access, facing the village.
V11	**Construction of paving using loose aggregate material in the downstream terracing**
	The collection system of the square (V3) and the cordonata (V9) channel rainwater to the downstream terracing. Its drainage surface should therefore consisting of loose aggregate material obtained by crushing local stone.
V12	**Soil filling to reduce the difference in height between the square and the downhill terracing**
	At the same time as the rebuilding of the external retaining walls (C2), it is also planned to raise the ground level of the downstream terracing of the east parvis by means of soil filling, in order to reduce the height difference that would otherwise be created with the parvis.
V13	**Equipment for the seating area**
	The project includes the creation of a seating area in the downstream terracing, using local stone quarry blocks directly laid on the ground as seats. The upper surface of the blocks will be polished and worked with fine bush-hammering.

Table 4.11 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 3: interventions on the west parvis and the external space to the south.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
C5	**Rainwater collection system**
	Integration of the existing water collection system with the construction of manholes for the maintenance and cleaning of the drainage channel grates.
C6	**Reconstruction of the wooden entrance door (village side) and internal locking system**
	The wooden door of the entrance portal to the west parvis is in a state of serious deterioration. Consideration should be given to restoring the existing door or, if this is not possible, replacing it with one of the same workmanship. It is also necessary to restore the original locking system of the gate, which consists of a pole that runs into a cavity inside the wall.
C7	**Restoration of the *kalldrëm* paving surrounding the well**
	The intervention consists of the removal of the existing paving in regular slabs and the restoration of the remaining part in *kalldrëm* with the integration of the missing parts, after the arrangement of the substrate.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
C8	**Conservative restoration of stone seats**
	In the west parvis there are several masonry seats, integrated in the architectural context, which include stone walls, a bench near the drinking fountain located at the side of the former school, and one around the well. The missing and/or degraded parts of these structures must be restored.
V14	**Installation of a system protecting against accidental falls**
	The arches of the *hajat* face outwards directly onto a drop of considerable height, creating a potentially dangerous situation for visitors, children in particular. The project involves the installation of fall protection elements for those sitting under the arches. Their design should be simple and linear, so as to blend in with the essential architecture of the *hajat,* and they should be created by local craftsmen.

Figure 4.42 – State of deterioration of the walls supporting the terracings.

Table 4.12 – Narrative master plan of Functional Lot 3: Interventions relating to the external areas adjacent to the architectural complex.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
C9	**Restoration of the *sofat* near the entrance to St Mary's Church**
	Outside the entrance portal on the west side of the church is a traditional *sofat* that needs to be restored to its original configuration. The unstable portion of the masonry up from the *sofat* also needs to be fixed by removing the weeds.
C10	**Reconstruction of roadside retaining walls**
	In anticipation of the construction of parking spaces along the vehicle road to the village (V17), the project includes the reconstruction of the retaining walls that currently delimit the carriageway. Since the walls have damaged areas, it is considered appropriate to rebuild them in a position slightly offset from their current one, so that the road can be secured in an area prone to landslides and rainwater runoff and the carriageway widened.
C11	**Restoration of the road retaining wall near the east entrance to the St Mary's Complex**
	The drystone wall that delimits and contains the access road at the eastern entrance to the architectural complex must be restored. The proposed solution is for the wall to take on the configuration of a bench with the dual function of a resting place and a fall protection element.
V15	**Lowering the entrance height to the east parvis**
	In the design, the entrance to the east parvis is 50 cm lower than it currently is. This means the internal unevenness of the rearranged parvis can be limited and at the same time the hump currently located at the entrance eliminated.

CHART OF PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS BY TYPE	
CODES	DESCRIPTION
V16	**Stabilisation of the slopes and protection of debris accumulations by hydroseeding with 'prati armati'**
	In order to stabilise the slope at the entrance to the east parvis, preventing instability phenomena and the erosion of the existing natural debris formations, it is proposed to partially cover the same slope with vegetation formations by hydroseeding using proven technologies such as 'prati armati'.
V17	**Construction of in-line parking spaces along the roadway**
	The project involves widening the roadway in the section of the road prior to the sharp bend at the end of the village to create about eight parking spaces. This is intended to eliminate the presence of vehicles both inside and near the entrance to the east parvis. The landscape impact of the car parks must be kept as low as possible; therefore, a partial widening of a section of road was opted for at the most favourable topographical point and where the intervention would require less work. Four parking spaces are located up from the roadway and four lower down. The former will be created by simply removing 60/80 cm of soil along a road section of about 15 metres. The chosen area should allow for such a widening without requiring the construction of retaining walls or embankments. Downhill, however, the parking spaces will be created by rebuilding the retaining wall of the road, which in any case must be replaced as it has partially collapsed, in a slightly shifted position, as described in item C.10.

4.3.3.1 Preliminary design of the work on the east parvis

Intervention C.4/V.6 *A new relationship space for the village*

The proposed work [Fig. 4.43] fits discreetly into a picturesque and highly identifiable place, with the aim of recreating a collective space to be used by villagers and visitors. The area is characterised by ground levels at different heights. It is, however, a large enough place both to satisfy common individual or social needs – as a place to meet, stop, rest, and meditate – and to welcome visitors and worshippers, as well as to host cultural, civil and religious events, such as the one still held every 21 November to celebrate Our Lady of Bënjë. The project aims to encourage this multiplicity of uses, emphasising the vocation of the east parvis of the church to act as the village 'square'.

Figure 4.43 – Perspective view of the main area of the east parvis. In the background is the apse, to the right the restored street bench, to the left the start of the cordonata connecting the parvis to the lower terrace.

Intervention V.2/V.12 *New modelling of the walking surface*

The project, first and foremost, improves the usability of the site by altering the slope of the walking surface, which is currently up to 8.5% at the highest point [Figs. 4.43, 4.45 and 4.46]. In the new configuration, achieved by soil filling and consequent raising of the retaining walls downhill [Fig. 4.45], the east parvis will consist of two levels with slopes of 5% (uphill) and 1.5% (downhill). In addition to reducing the internal height difference, the work will facilitate access to the area, which will be lowered by 50 cm compared to the current position [Fig. 4.48].

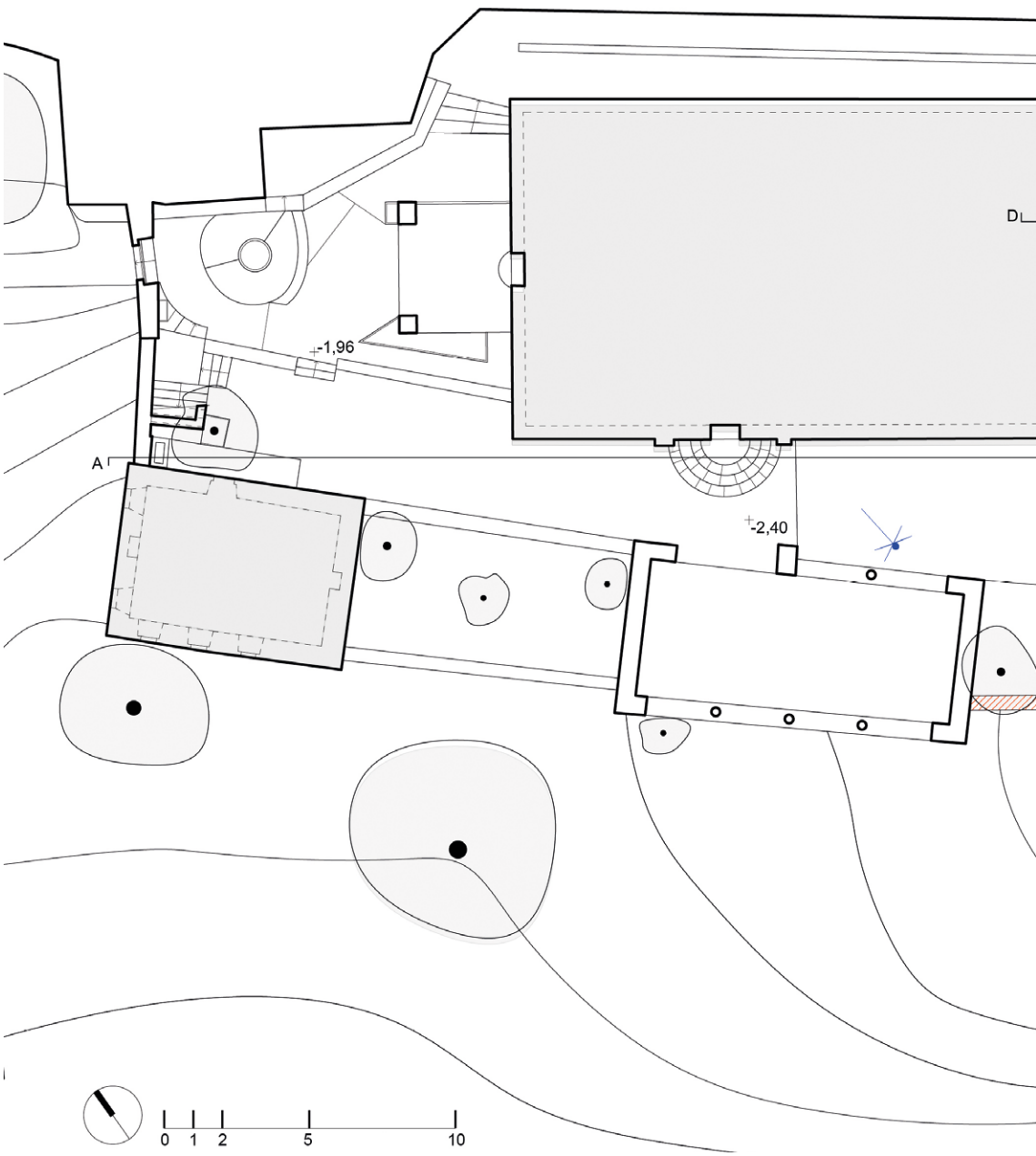
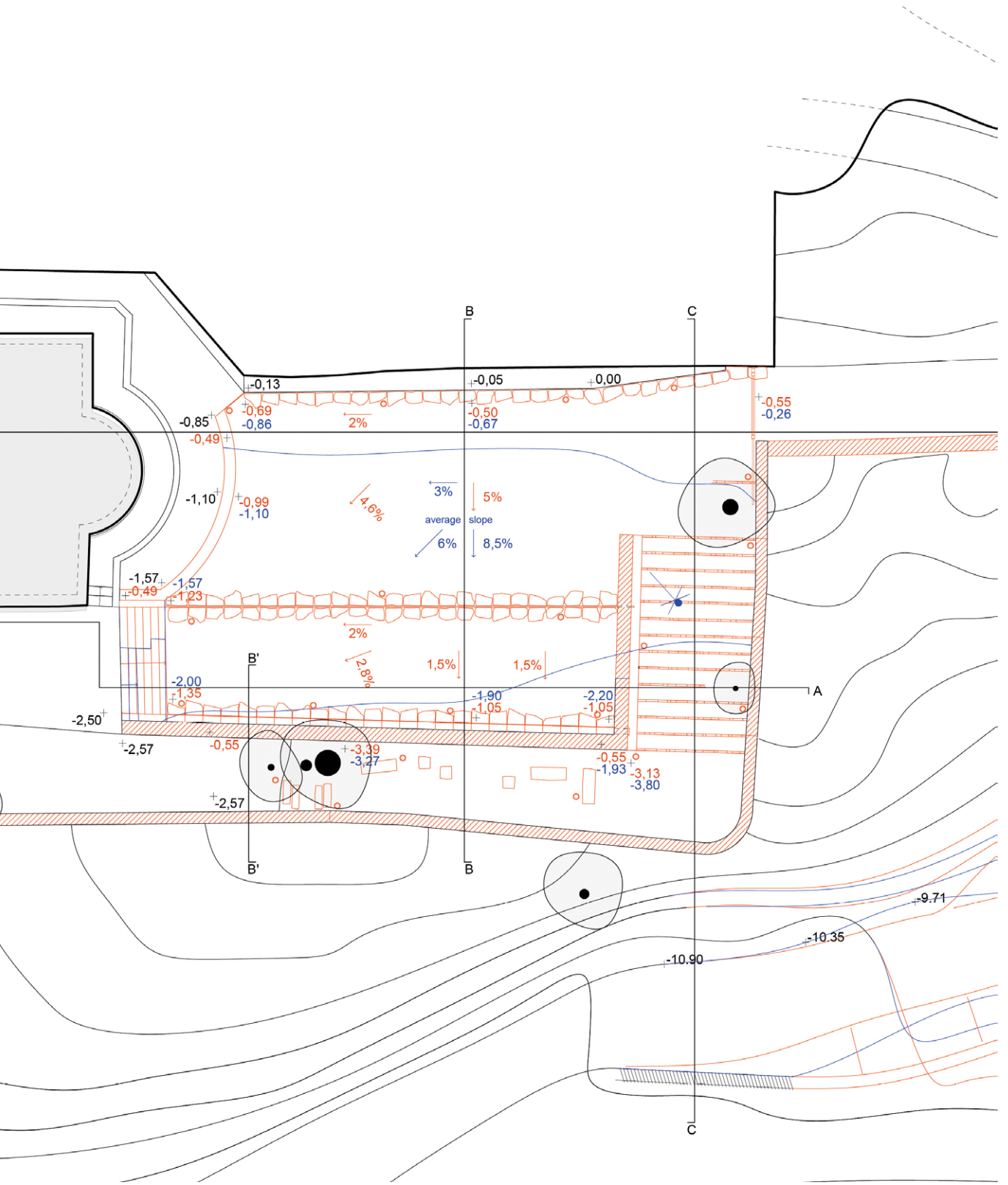


Figure 4.44 – Technical plan showing current *(blue)* and planned slopes *(orange)*.


B
C
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0,00
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-0,69
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5%
average
slope
6%
8,5%
-1,57
-0,49
-1,57
-1,23
2%
B'
2,8%
1,5%
1,5%
A
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-2,57
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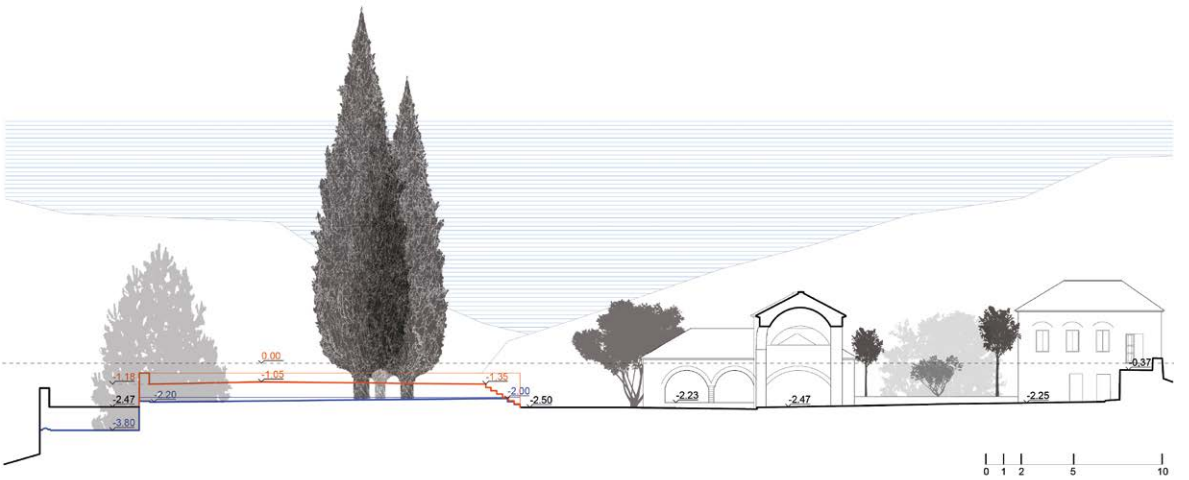


Figure 4.45 – Section A showing the current *(blue)* and planned *(orange)* walking surface.

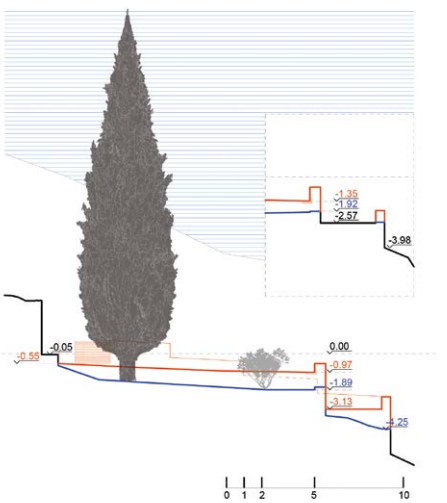


Figure 4.46 – Section B with the new slope of the walking surface and the reconstruction of the retaining walls.

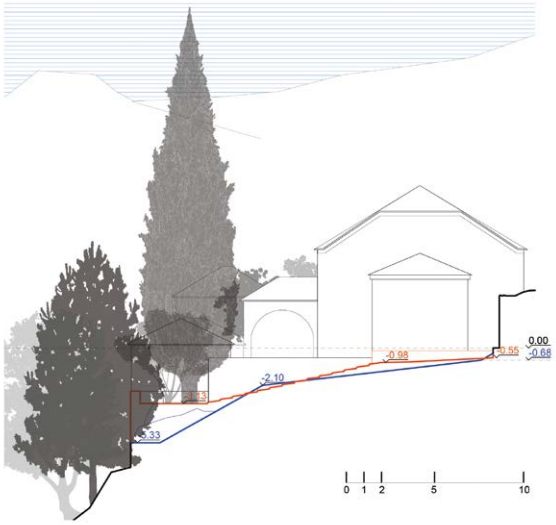


Figure 4.47 – Section C across the cordonata.

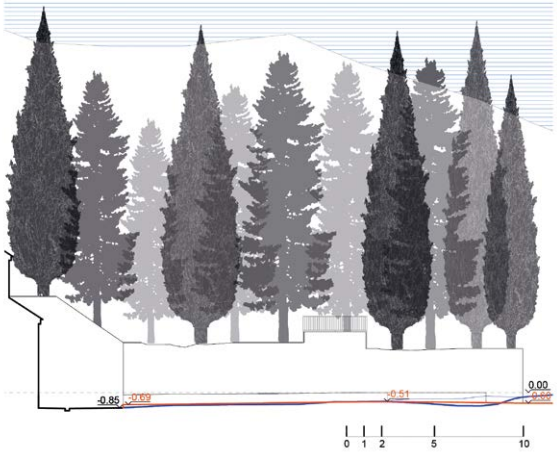


Figure 4.48 – Section D at the entrance to the east parvis, right-hand side.

Intervention V.6/V.9 *Connection between floors at different heights*

The remodelling of the east parvis makes it necessary to connect it with the heights of the neighbouring spaces. In particular, in order to bridge the increased height difference between the area and the space to the south between the church and the *hajat*, it is necessary to add four steps to the two already existing ones. [Fig. 4.49] The project also provides for the connection of the east parvis the downhill terracing by means of a cordonata consisting of fourteen slightly inclined steps. [Fig. 4.50]

Figure 4.49 – Connecting stairs between the east parvis and the terrace below.

Figure 4.50 – Perspective view of the east parvis towards the valley. To the left is the new cordonata that leads to the terracing lower down.

Intervention V.3 *Drainage system*

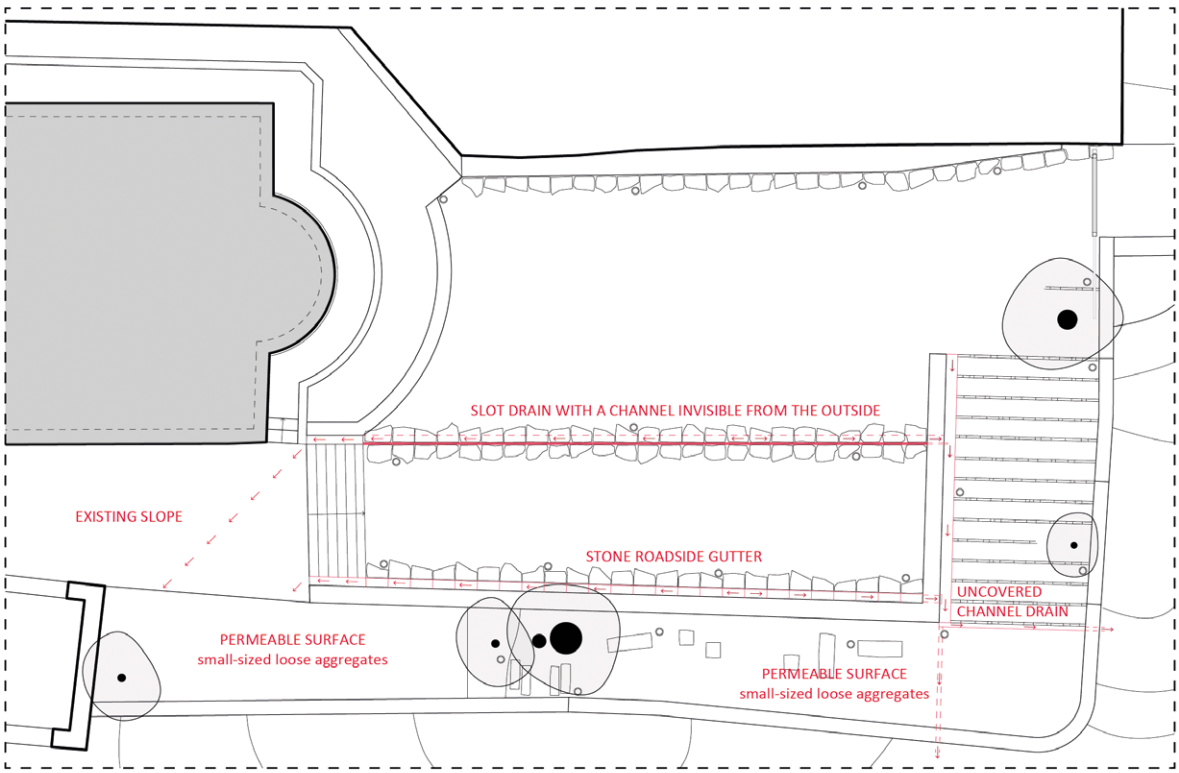


Figure 4.51 – Diagram of the east parvis drainage system.

The change in gradient of the levels that make up the east parvis made it necessary to study a new surface water drainage solution to supplement the existing one. In the new arrangement, rainwater runoff, facilitated by the slope of the walking surface towards the valley, makes use of two different linear collection systems. In the centre of the parvis, the water from the upper part, with a gradient of 5%, is collected by a slotted metal drainage channel grate with a channel invisible from the outside, lined with irregular slabs of local stone; downstream, along the lower edge of the relatively flatter part of the parvis (1.5% gradient), there is an L-shaped stone roadside gutter (or 'French' ditch) at least 25 cm wide. In the plan in Figure 4.51, the two systems are indicated by the numbers 1 and 2 respectively. No. 3 instead indicates a channel drain at the base of the cordonata, covered with Albanera sandstone slabs with open joints serving as drainage channel grates, similar to the one already found all around the church. Manholes must be included in the construction to ensure proper maintenance and to prevent the accumulation of materials over time from obstructing the flow of rainwater outside the retaining walls.

Intervention V.5/V7 *Lighting*

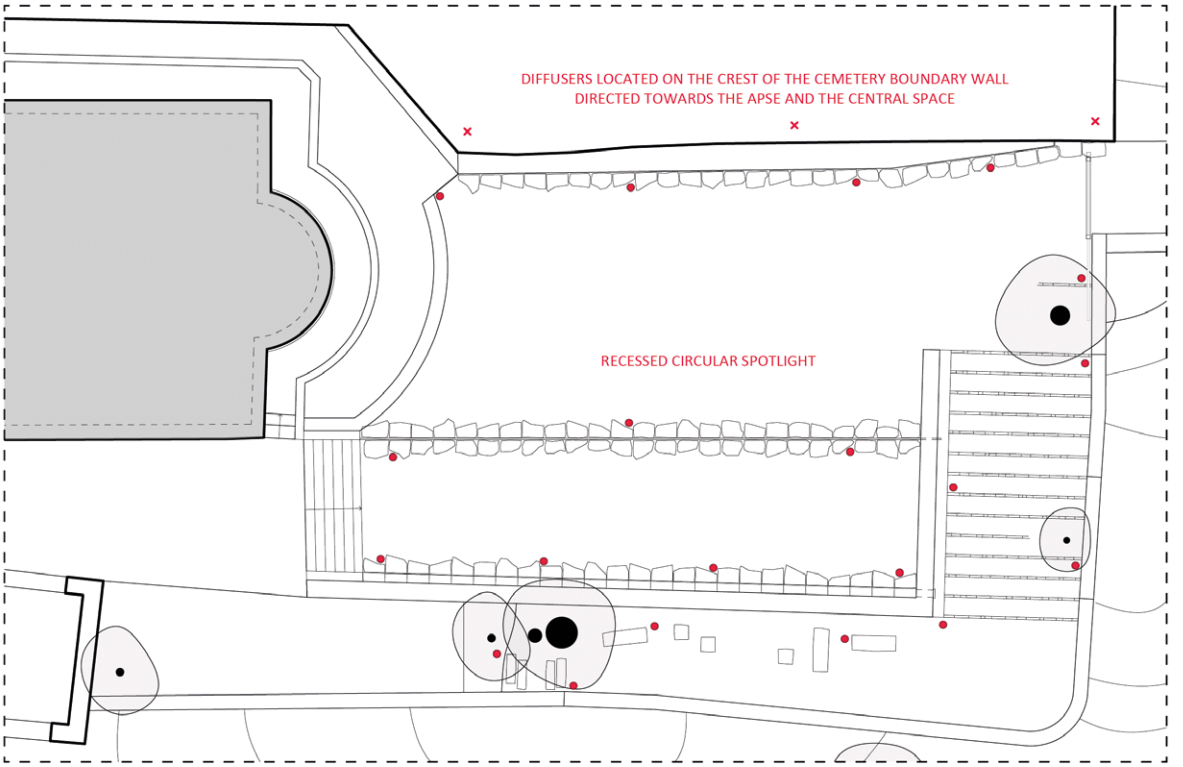


Figure 4.52 – Location of the lighting fixtures.

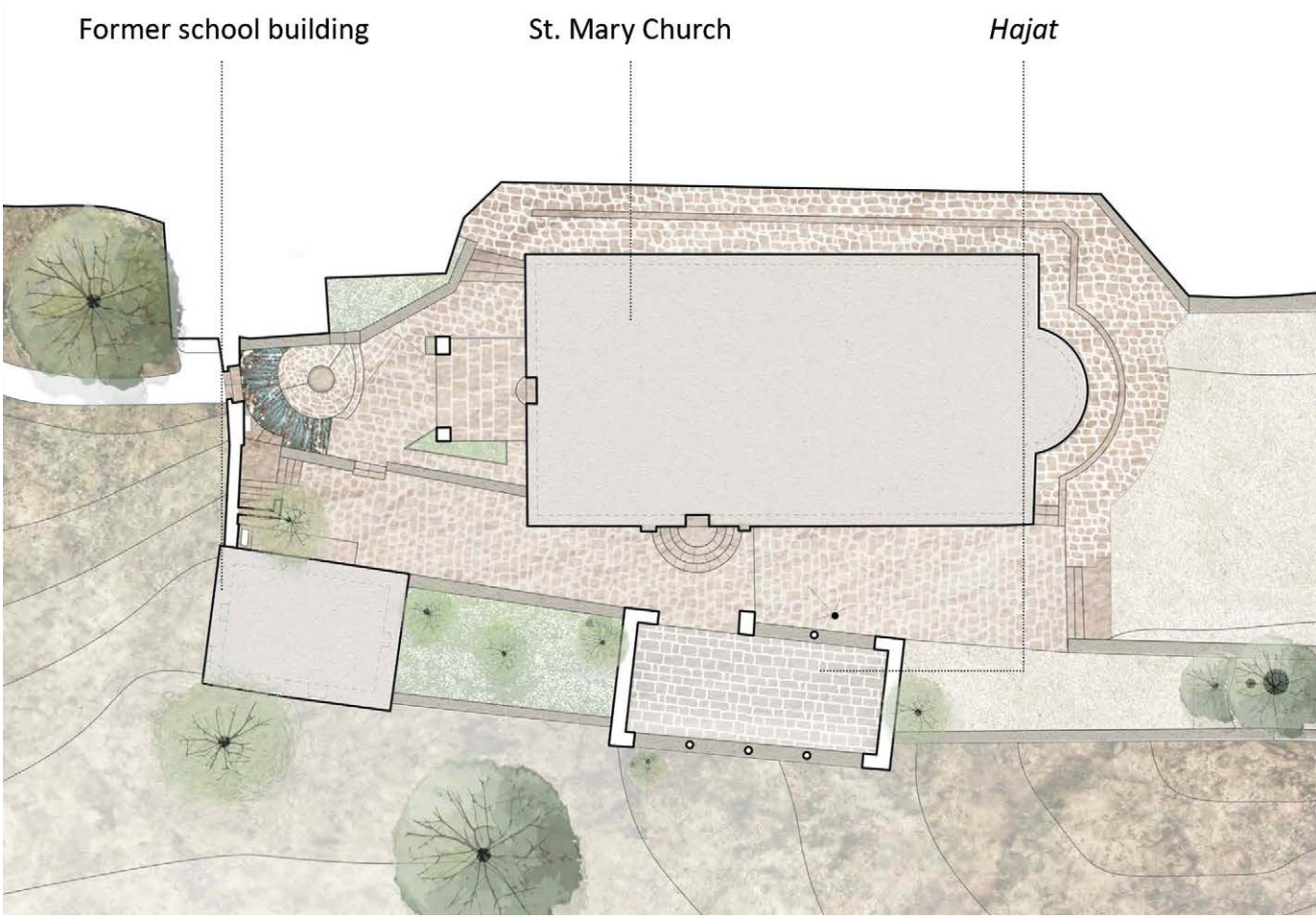
The space around the church is currently lit by lamps mounted on reinforced concrete poles, which it is proposed be removed. They would be replaced with lighting fixtures with soft, warm light (minimum 3000K) placed on supports of a maximum height of 80 cm equipped with adjustable diffusers facing the church and the central space of the parvis. These would be placed high up on the cemetery terrace, partially hidden by the retaining wall on the north side of the parvis. The system is completed by circular spotlights embedded into the paved surface, arranged in an irregular manner to create a constellation of light points to signal in the dark the presence of walls, benches, steps and cordonata. Figure 4.52 shows, with a red cross, the supports with diffusers placed above the terracing wall of the cemetery and the circular spotlights embedded in the floor are indicated with a red dot.

Intervention V.4/V11 *Flooring*

In the project, particular attention was paid to the choice of materials to be used in the flooring, favouring those already present in the outdoor spaces of St Mary's Complex. Taking advantage of the area's lithological propensity to flaking and the generation of surface debris deposits, it is suggested that this scree, found in the immediate vicinity of the village, be used for the substrate of the parvis in the eastern part of the complex. For the surface layouts, on the other hand, the same local stone used in the west parvis is to be used, but with slabs of different shapes and sizes. [Figs. 4.54 and

4.55] The choice fell on irregular elements of varying size, from a minimum of 5 cm to a maximum of 20 cm, laid on a bed of stabilised soil. This results in semi-permeable paving capable of limiting the flow of rainwater to be channelled into the drainage system. For the same reason, the terracing at the base of the cordonata, onto which the rainwater collected in the surface above is channelled, is planned in small-sized loose aggregates. [Fig. 4.53]

Figure 4.53 – Perspective view of the terracing down from the east parvis of St Mary's Complex.

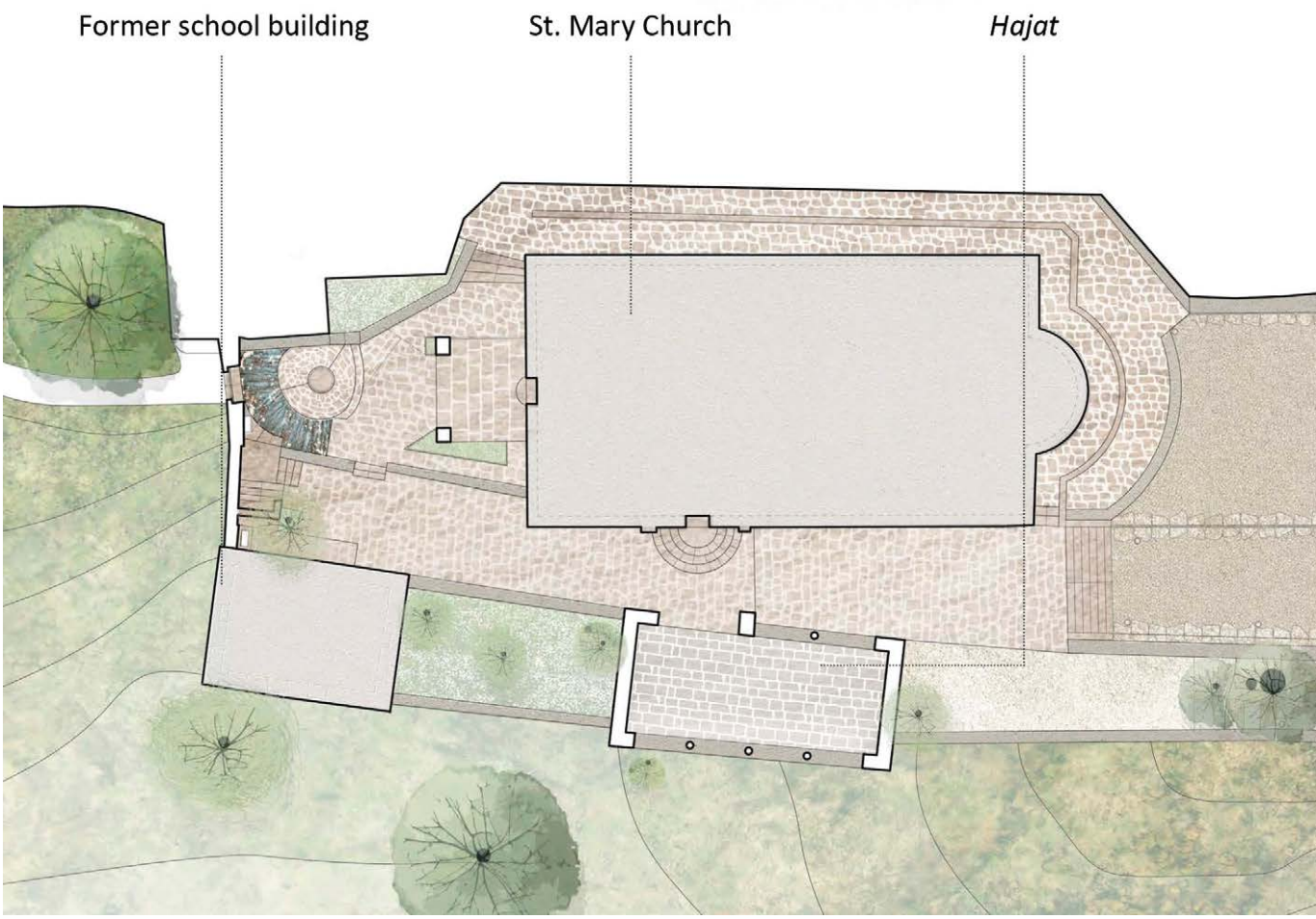


CURRENT STATE

1. **WALLS:** exposed dry-sandstone masonry
2. **STEPS:** split sandstone ashlars (Albanera type)
3. **LOCAL STONE PAVED PARTS:** sandstone slabs (Albanera type) with irregular placement
4. **PORCH PAVING:** regular sandstone slabs (Albanera type)
5. **DRAINAGE SYSTEM:** sandstone channel drain (Albanera type) with stone drainage channel grates and no manholes
6. **KALLDRËM:** traditional paving made of split stone
7. **DIRT ROAD:** an unpaved surface covered with weeds and stones from collapses
8. **PLANTING BEDS:** terraces covered with grass and wild shrubs
9. **ESCARPMENTS AND SLOPES:** natural scree formations devoid of vegetation with aggregates of varying grain sizes and lateral surface drainage ditches

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

Figure 4.54 – Plan of the current state (*top*) with retaining wall and paving specifications (*bottom*).



PROJECT STATE

1. **RETAINING WALLS:** the Project project does not alter the position of the existing retaining walls but changes their height. The heights of the new floor level require partial reconstruction of the retaining walls and crests of the walls with the addition of the missing parts necessary to reach the new heights and act as parapets. The additions are made with the same materials and techniques used in the existing retaining walls.

2. **CONNECTION:** the alteration of the new floor level of the east parvis with new slopes and elevations makes it necessary to create a connection connect it with the spaces on the southern side of the church by means of a ramp consisting of seven steps to be built with regular split sandstone ashlars (Albanera type).

3. **CORDONATA:** steps consisting of risers with sandstone kerbstones (Albanera type) arranged with the thin edge exposed. The technique of making the risers is based on the kalldrëm construction technique. The treads, which are slightly inclined, have the same paving as the east parvis (see below).

4. **PAVING OF THE EAST PARVIS:** irregular elements of local sandstone (Albanera type) with irregular placement laid on a bed of stabilised earth. The stones are smaller than those currently used in the rest of the open spaces around the church.

5. **DRAINAGE SYSTEM:** In the centre of the east parvis a metal slot drain with the channel invisible from the outside and a stone roadside gutter are planned; downhill, along the retaining boundary wall, there is an L-shaped stone roadside gutter. At the foot of the cordonata is a concealed gutter covered with stone slabs interspersed with drainage channel grates and a manhole.

6. **TERRACING:** in the terracing down from the east parvis permeable paving is planned, made of loose aggregates, possibly obtained by crushing stone material found on site.

7. **KALLDRËM:** the kalldrëm paved areas in the west parvis need to be carefully recovered and restored.

8. **PLANTING BEDS:** the removal of weeds and the periodic maintenance of the grassy and shrub vegetation currently present is planned.

9. **ESCARPMENTS AND SLOPES:** the slopes near the church, affected by hydrogeological instability, must be consolidated by creating a layer of vegetation using hydroseeding with the "prati armati" technology.

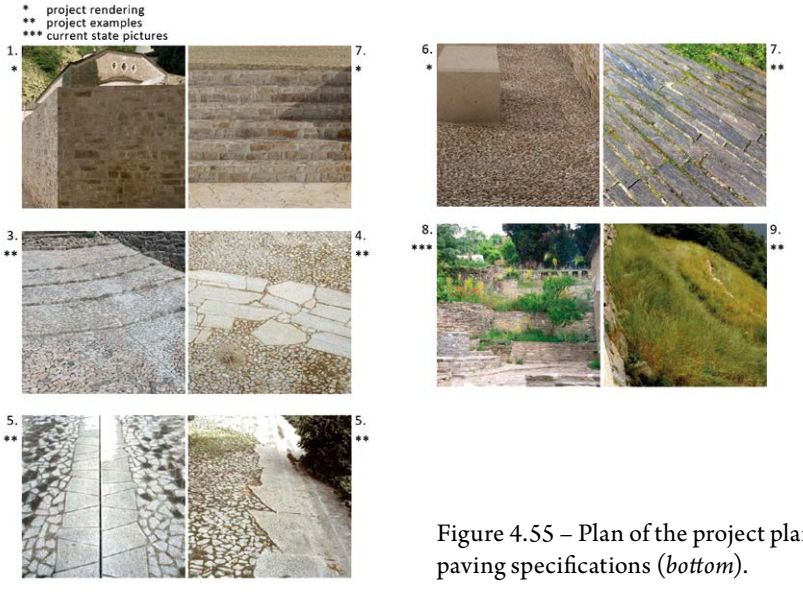


Figure 4.55 – Plan of the project plan (*top*) with retaining wall and paving specifications (*bottom*).

Intervention V.16 *The "prati armati" technology*

The slope near the eastern entrance to the monumental complex shows significant instability. The continuous surface erosion does not allow the growth of vegetation, which is hindered by the overlay of stone aggregates. The proven technology of "prati armati" is a method of slope stabilisation by hydroseeding a mixture of seeds, fertilisers and natural adhesives onto the scree surface. The work is carried out using tracked dumpers suitable for reaching even inaccessible sites. It is carried out in a single phase, without site preparation, and does not require any topsoil backfill or erosion control works. It also allows for the rapid development of deep-rooted herbaceous formations, which can form the basis of an ecological sequence in which the growth of plants of the local flora is also favoured. [Fig. 4.56]

Figure 4.56 – Graphical simulation of the effects of the hydroseeding of 'prati armati' technology.

Phase 0
CURRENT STATE

Phase 1
STARTING HERBACEOUS GROWTH POST SOWING

The effectiveness of this intervention depends on the improvement of the section of road above with rainwater regimentation, which is also essential to improve the entire road connection of the village with the valley floor. At the same time as the road works, adequate drainage will have to be provided with lateral drainage ditches and possible underground transverse drains, in order to channel the runoff into the bed of the underlying thalweg. Without such works, the aggregates would be continuously washed away, cancelling out the effects of the intervention.

Phase 2
SUMMER APPEARANCE IN THE FIRST YEARS POST INTERVENTION

Phase 3
LIKELY VEGETAL SUCCESSION AS SCRUB

CHAPTER 5

Early elements for a Lëngarica River Greenway

Gabriele Paolinelli

Abstract: The study described in the previous chapters highlighted the importance of effective forms of widespread protection and enhancement of natural and cultural landscape features. The concomitant process of establishing the Vjosa Wild River National Park in accordance with the international classification of protected areas of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has further raised the perception of the usefulness of a systemic strategy for the conservation and enhancement of the landscapes of the Vjosa River Basin. In this respect, the chapter examines the topic of greenways through the case study of the lower Lëngarica River Valley. The development of greenways can contribute to the pursuit of sustainability and the landscapes of the Vjosa basin have natural and cultural identities that can be protected and enhanced through them. A preliminary study on the Lower Lëngarica Valley highlights its potential from this point of view.

5.1 Greenways as a resource for sustainability

Greenways are a strategic and management-related project category aimed at promoting and developing forms of recreation and tourism based on the priority of protecting the natural and cultural characteristics of landscapes. As such, they are now clearly contextualised within sustainability policies and actions.

> «Charles Little credits the late William H. White, a prominent environmental writer, who invented and used the term greenways in his 1959 monograph entitled, *Securing Open Space for Urban America*, published by the Urban Land Institute. During the 1980s, there were two additional important events which significantly helped the spread of the greenway movement. The first event was a recommendation made by the US President's Commission on American Outdoors Report [...]. The second important event was the publishing of Charles Little's seminal book, *Greenways for America* [...].» (Fabos, 2004: 328-329).

After a brief incubation phase in North America, where they originated, since the 1990s the concepts, theories and experiences relating to greenways have also spread to Europe. Their design is supported by scientific knowledge, but it can also be understood by the general public and expresses strategic values in the pursuit of multiple objectives. A further factor in the spatial effectiveness of greenways is the fact that the resources and their enhancement areas are not dispersed in isolation in the territories but are included within extensive networks made up of corridors and wider areas and linked by slow mobility routes (Ahern, 2002).

> «The word greenway connotes two separated images: green suggests natural amenities – forests, riverbanks, wild-life; way implies a route or path. Put them together and they

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

describe a vision of natural corridors crisscrossing a landscape that has been otherwise transformed by development.» (Flink & Searns, 1993: XV).

The application of the greenway category to areas of ancient civilisation, such as those of southern Europe, in particular, ensures that the amenities to be protected and enhanced are cultural as well as natural, and common as well as exceptional. These aspects were also evident in the case of the path studied in this research.

In this sense, it is important to consider how the effective promotion and sustainable use of landscapes can result in indirect forms of the protection of their natural and cultural characteristics through processes that induce the individual and social promotion of cultural heritage.

Greenways, moreover, are a category geared towards spatial integration that also focuses on areas of increased anthropic pressure, where they fulfil the twofold function of providing accessible open spaces for recreational use and protecting and reinforcing residual natural and cultural resources (Flink & Searns, 1993). In this sense, greenways can be seen as a strategic and management complement to protected natural areas such as parks and reserves.

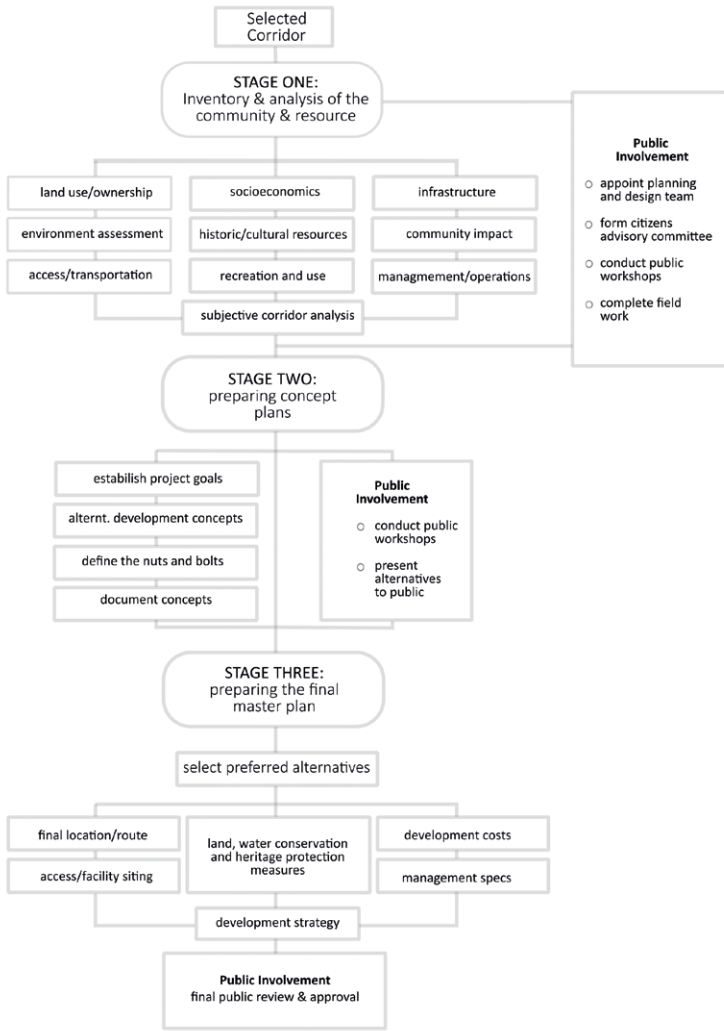

Figure 5.1 – Example of a greenway design process.

Planning and design for the activation and management of greenways also promotes the generation of local forms of economy that can complement existing ones and, in some cases, evolve them. [Fig. 5.1] In fact, greenways have significant territorial marketing potential, in that they can leverage the promotion of local identities in broad, regional, national and international contexts.

Generally speaking, the protection and enhancement of landscapes require systemic strategies and actions that are not just restricted to precepts, nor limited to entities of extraordinary value. Regulatory requirements must be combined with moral suasion methods aimed at various types of actors and stakeholders (institutional, economic and social, local and other). The effectiveness of the protection of natural and cultural excellences also depends on the care of the landscapes to which they belong.

Ecological networks are systemic sets of reference indicators for the landscape planning and design of general and sectoral spatial policies. In common with greenways, they have a widespread spatial configuration. Ecological corridors and core-areas are immersed in matrices that are to some degree ecologically favourable for the conservation of plant and animal biodiversity. By analogy, greenways allow for the dissemination of sustainable human forms of resource use and landscape enjoyment in territories. So, it is also possible to indirectly support areas that play a pre-eminently nature conservation role.[1]

A recent study on the municipal territory of Azambuja, in the Lisbon metropolitan area, is indicative of the distinct nature of such an approach. This experience clearly shows that routes – as material infrastructures – and itineraries – as immaterial narrative proposals – are the functional framework on which a greenway strategy sets the vision of the use of the places and landscapes of the territory it is intended to enhance.

«A balanced landscape will increase the value of the greenways and in return, the routes can develop activities, such as nature tourism, environmental education that will promote landscape sustainability and stimulate social, economic and ecological dynamics. The […] holistic design of greenways can help to improve landscape conditions and contribute to sustainable landscape planning and generally encourage more sustainable development, with concomitant economic, social and environmental benefits.» (Pena *et al.*, 2010: 982).

Remaining in Southern Europe, for greater relevance to the context under analysis, two Italian cases still illustrate the specificities and potential of a landscape-based design approach to greenways: the "Lambro River Valley Greenways System" (Toccolini *et al.*, 2006) and the "Greenways of Pavia" (Ziman Scudo, 2006).

According to the European Greenway Association, greenways are «ways dedicated to cyclists and pedestrians, in cities and in the countryside, routes developed for recreational purposes and/or for undertaking daily trips» (EGA, 2000: 13). According to both Ahern (1995) and Fabos (1995), Ziman Scudo proposes instead to consider a conceptually more complex definition.

[1] According to IUCN protected area categories adopted in 1994 and article V of the revised African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources 2003, a "Conservation Area" is «(…) designated and managed mainly or wholly for one of the following purposes: i) Science or wilderness protection (Strict Nature Reserve/Wilderness Areas); ii) Ecosystem protection and recreation (National Parks); iii) Conservation of specific natural features (National Monuments); iv) Conservation through management interventions (Habitat/Species Management Areas); v) Landscape/seascape conservation and re-creation (Protected Landscapes/Seascapes); vi) The sustainable use of natural ecosystems (Managed Resource Protected Areas).» (Dillon, 2004:17). The Vjosa protection has been implemented in Albania under National Parks Category II.

> «It is understood as a multipurpose, ecological, cultural and recreational network of linear elements, based on resource planning and compatible with sustainable land use (…). The differences between this approach and others in Italy derive from the differences between the basic concepts. Most existing paths and trails are single purpose, dealing basically with transportation. These new greenways on the other hand are multifunctional and are based on the study and management of resources of the entire landscape context. The trails are perceived as connective elements between people, places and resources and are being chosen as part of a larger scope of reclamation, protection and rediscovery of neglected natural and cultural features.» (Ziman Scudo, 2006: 132).

This approach, consistent with the original conception of greenways, avoids their improper reduction to routes, which, although essential, are to be understood more as means rather than ends. Greenways are rather understood as strategies to promote landscape-based tourism-recreational policies. As such, they allow for the 'integration' of landscapes into processes for their conception and into interventions for their implementation. The integration of landscape into policies is a cardinal objective on which the Council of Europe Landscape Convention (EC, 2000, 2016, point 5.d) commits the signatory states to an approach that is essential but still not sufficiently widespread and practised.

Among the policies that influence landscapes, tourism-recreation policies are less relevant economically and financially speaking than energy, agriculture, settlement and infrastructure policies. Tourism-recreational activities, however, tend to affect vulnerable contexts constituting essential factors that generate demand for use and whose interpretation is therefore crucial to generate sustainable responses.

The social and economic models that greenways are intended to promote are bottom-up, based on the involvement of populations and social and economic players in development processes, from the preliminary conception phases through to executive management. Both the particular economic complementarities with respect to conventional forms of production and service activities depend on this profile, as do the possibilities of effective protection of the natural and cultural characteristics of landscapes, based on the aforementioned socio-cultural processes of effective promoting of cultural heritage.

5.2 Some basic reasons supporting the appropriateness of developing a network of Vjosa Greenways

The scale relevance of the landscape concept of a network of Vjosa Greenways could support strategic initiatives of international standing and the consequent access to financial instruments not available in local operating contexts. They should aim to activate local socio-economic forms of tourism and recreation other than 'business as usual'. The risks associated with the latter, to which the Albanian territory is also exposed due to the growing tourist demand, are indeed intuitable.

As mentioned in § 1.2, the Vjosa Wild River National Park (Greca *et al.*, 2022) will enable the implementation of strategies and actions to protect the river ecosystems of the main course and those of the tributaries included in the perimeter. This initiative, in accordance with the IUCN classification of protected areas,[2] combines, with the spatial

[2] "National park" is protection category II as defined by the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. According to this classification, national parks «[…] are large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.» See < https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf >, p. 16 (2024-01-27).

identification of the river ecosystems it aims to protect as core zones, the identification and regulation of buffer-zones[3] with respect to neighbouring territories with ordinary governance regimes (Greca *et al*., 2022).

The spatial arrangement of the national park is in itself logical in scientific and technical terms and appropriate in political and administrative terms, since it expresses levels of protection that cannot easily be extended much beyond what is defined. However, consideration must be given to the needs and opportunities to implement good management practices also in parts of the territory outside of the national park that have remarkable landscape qualities and include other watercourses in the Vjosa Basin and are therefore part of its systemic nature. For example, in the Lower Lëngarica Valley, the perimeter of the Vjosa National Park excludes areas of land that have until now maintained significant integrity with respect to the effects of production, settlement and infrastructure factors that have been found to be responsible for significant alterations elsewhere. In this quadrant of the municipality of Përmet, however, there are extensive conservation areas included in the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park, within the scope of whose management it is also possible to integrate effective strategies and actions for the conservation and enhancement of historical-archaeological and scenic-panoramic features as well as natural and ecological ones. Although these conditions are also common to other protected parts of the Albanian territory of the Vjosa catchment area, for many tens of kilometres of the length of the river in the main valley floor, the national park areas are adjacent to territories under ordinary governance (Greca *et al*., 2022: 12, Fig. 3). In such cases, any lack of effective conservation and enhancement policies for the valley landscape would not only limit the development of the social and economic potential associated with the resources and policies of the national park, but would probably also produce external factors of disturbance, damage and therefore impoverish the natural and ecological features it is intended to protect and enhance.

It is therefore necessary to envisage and promote the spread and normalisation of forms of cohabitation, in order to integrate the social and economic connotations of human populations with the characteristics of ecosystems, and not only the protected, highly natural ones, but also the more anthropised ones related to the former. In such a context where there are both instances and opportunities, the effectiveness potential of greenways can be developed by assuming in explicit and concrete terms that recreational and tourist infrastructure for slow mobility is in no way the end of the strategies and actions being devised, but rather the main means of implementing them.

5.3 The lower course of the Lëngarica River as a pilot case study

The Lëngarica Valley is a significant sample representing part of the landscapes of the Vjosa River Basin and the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park.

As part of the research documented in this book, after an initial survey in the late spring of 2021, a field survey was conducted in February 2022 in the Lower Lëngarica Valley, from the mouth of the Vjosa near Petran, up the hydrographic right to the mouth of the canyon at Kadiu Bridge.[4] These locations represent two primary thresholds of the possible local vision of a greenway connecting the main valley channel of the Vjosa River and the site of natural, historical, archaeological and scenic interest between the Ottoman bridge and the canyon.

[3] «A buffer zone in an «[…] area around a core protected area that is managed to help maintain protected area values» See < https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf >, p. 55 (2024-01-27).

[4] This second activity was carried out during a residential workshop that the author coordinated in Përmet from 15-18 February 2022, as part of the Landscape Architecture Course 2021-2022 of the fifth year of the Master's Degree in Architecture at the Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic University of Tiranë.

The mouth of the Lëngarica acts as a node in a potential network of Vjosa Greenways. In such a vision, the area of the thermal baths and the Kadiu Bridge would take on the role of the side valley terminal of the network, which would also include connections with the paths and open trails that complete the potential offer of landscape enjoyment and enable the reactivation and actualisation of historical relations. The following could branch off from the area: (1) the path to Bënjë, on the hydrographic right, useful for promoting the material and immaterial renovation of the village (see §. 3.1; Chapters 4 and 6), (2) access to the top of the canyon via the forest road on the hydrographical left, and (3) access to the bottom of the canyon itself via the riverbed. The first option would be accessible on foot; the second on foot, by bicycle and on horseback or donkey/mule; the third only by water or on foot, with greater limitations due to the marked irregularity of the river bed and the variability of the river flow.

In the absence of a network of valley greenways, the availability of such routes could, however, have critical effects due to an insufficiently systemic infrastructure strategy. In fact, it would encourage the use of private vehicles, which is in itself far too entrenched in the lifestyles of residents and tourists, as well as in development choices and interventions. Moreover, it would exclude a large part of the valley landscape from the 'slow' enjoyment capable of enhancing its recreational and tourist potential and thereby reduce the concentration of anthropic pressure on the area with the greatest tourist attraction.

Both the first and the second surveys showed that the river has a moderate water outflow compared to what has built up over time in the riverbeds during moderate flows and flooding. [Fig. 5.2] This can reasonably also be attributed to the increasing duration and intensity of drought periods and the spread of increased aridity in ecosystems, even in landscapes known for the richness of their waters. In floodplain areas, the consolidation of reduced flows and periods of increased runoff can give rise to ecological successions that develop riparian plant formations, producing new biological and scenic richness. [Fig. 5.3]. In the case under examination, however, the reduction in the water flow can also be directly attributed to the hydraulic dikes for hydroelectric collection built upstream of the river (see § 1.2.2), which are also responsible for ecosystem alterations.

Figure 5.2 – Example of late-winter (February 2022) surface water flow conditions of the Lëngarica River in relation to the width of the hydraulic corridor.

Figure 5.3 – The development of riparian vegetation in a right-hand floodplain of the Lëngarica River (February 2022) indicates on the one hand the limited occupation by reduced water runoff and on the other hand the self-regeneration potential of ecosystems.

It is however essential for two conditions to occur: (1) that the management of the water resource preserves at least the river's ecological flow throughout the year, and (2) that all areas pertaining to the river are firmly and effectively protected from any settlement, infrastructural or productive transformation, including forestry or agriculture. In fact, although the water flow tends to be reduced in active riverbeds with sections of only a few metres, the considerable overall width of the riverbed gives the river resilience properties that it would not have with a straightened and narrowed course within a canal-shaped corridor. This allows the watercourse to move and continue its evolution under safe hydraulic conditions, limiting the vulnerability of agricultural crops, settlements and infrastructure. The river, however, does not require artificial embankments, as it has mostly marked incisions in the riverbed, and retains an appreciable naturalness in its functioning and therefore also in its appearance. [Fig. 5.4]

The prevalence of sub-vertical river banks is due to alluvial sediment collapses caused by hydraulic erosion or the outcropping geological structure. This characteristic generates a barrier effect that renders large parts of the riverbed inaccessible to people, fostering the biological plant and animal enrichment of ecosystems. In the adaptive perspective of greenways and in general for the landscape design culture, the tourist-recreational enhancement of this structural aspect of the landscape is sustainable in terms of indirect visual enjoyment, through the widespread and significant scenic opportunities present. This type of choice should not be contextualised at the scale of individual open spaces, but rather at the scale of the larger mosaics that a greenway comprises. In such contexts, it is possible to identify suitable structural features to organise access to the riverbeds with routes that encourage different uses of the watercourse.

The energy of the typical profile of mountain formations constitutes a scenic, as well as ecological, feature of the landscape. It encompasses the lower mountains in the

main tributary valley of the Lëngarica and the side valleys of the same sub-basin, and is dominated by the Nemërçka Mountain Range, which bounds the hydrographic right of the Vjosa with mighty and extremely steep spurs. [Fig. 5.5]

Figure 5.4 – Erosion of alluvial terraces and incision of the Lëngarica riverbed with a lateral outcrop of substrate.

Figure 5.5 – The lower course of the Lëngarica River, taken downstream, a few kilometres from its mouth in the Vjosa River, with the Nemërçka Mountain Range on the hydrographic left of the main valley.

Figure 5.6 – The road up the Lëngarica on the hydrographic right of the valley to the Kadiu Bridge thermal bath area.

The roadway along the lower right slope of the Lëngarica connects with the Vjosa Valley, [Fig. 5.6] has excellent morphological congruity with the natural characteristics of the profile and carries a low and decidedly discontinuous vehicular load due to the absence of densely inhabited settlements and productive or recreational activities with a considerable influx of people. The road, with its attractive views of extensive stretches of the valley, affords widespread visual enjoyment of the river, potentially benefiting people who may find it difficult to use paths along the banks or in the riverbed. In addition, the road would still provide continuity to the routes in sections where the areas close to the river banks cannot be used due to morphological constraints or the improper fencing of agricultural land.

The road has a common asphalt pavement which, especially during a start-up phase, would be compatible with integration into the route network of a greenway. In the case of redevelopment work, stabilised earth paving could be created, which can make walking more pleasant as well as reduce the volume and speed of rainwater runoff flowing into drainage networks that are no longer widely managed by agricultural activities, if not entirely absent. In relation to this aspect, there are disused concrete hydraulic-agricultural channels in the vicinity of some stretches of river banks, with consequent internal and induced degradation. [Fig. 5.7] This infrastructural network could be converted into country trails without disturbing the desirable initiatives for the revival and innovation of productive agricultural activities, which the greenway itself would help to promote and support with tourism-recreational activities.

Figure 5.7 – A section of disused hydraulic-agricultural canalisation in the alluvial terraces on the hydrographical right of the Lëngarica.

As mentioned above, farmland fences taken right up to the edge of the riverbank were found in several places. [Fig. 5.8] They create intentional interruptions in practicability which compromise the usability of the countryside plan in the area adjacent to the riverbed. A buffer corridor to the side of this would allow for more widespread public enjoyment of the river and would foster the monitoring and management of its riparian ecosystems. To this end, it would not be necessary to do away with extensive areas for agro-sylvo-pastoral uses. Even with a 10-15 m strip, it would be possible to create a safe path, accessible also to maintenance and rescue vehicles, with a field hedge made up of an uneven-aged and multi-species vegetation composition to separate it from private land, and a multi-species herbaceous strip away from the riverbank edge to protect it from the escarpments. [Fig. 5.9] This work would have a very favourable cost-benefit ratio as it would bring biological and scenic enrichment with insignificant construction and maintenance costs, protect both private agricultural and public riverine spaces, and allow the compatible enjoyment of both.

According to what has also been considered in previous chapters, the Lëngarica also features a rich temporal stratification of evidence of human history related to it. The prehistoric caves, the Ottoman bridge, the 19th-century mill, the hydraulic-agricultural structure of the crops of the river terraces on the valley floor, the valley floor road, the military posts and the 20th-century agrarian irrigation network, the hydroelectric plants and the more recent recreational facilities, all constitute a set of indications of the relations that people have established with the watercourse. Their effective cultural narrative could highlight their value with recreational social benefits and economic opportunities linked to the development of cultural tourism.

Between the confluence of the Lëngarica and the Vjosa in Petran [Fig. 5.10a] and the thermal area a few kilometres upstream [Fig. 5.11f], the route is made attractive by numerous opportunities to enjoy the river landscape. Its sensitive recreational and tourist enhancement has two non-negligible advantages in that it would make it pos-

Figure 5.8 – An example of an improper interruption of the practicability of the edge of the right bank of the Lëngarica.

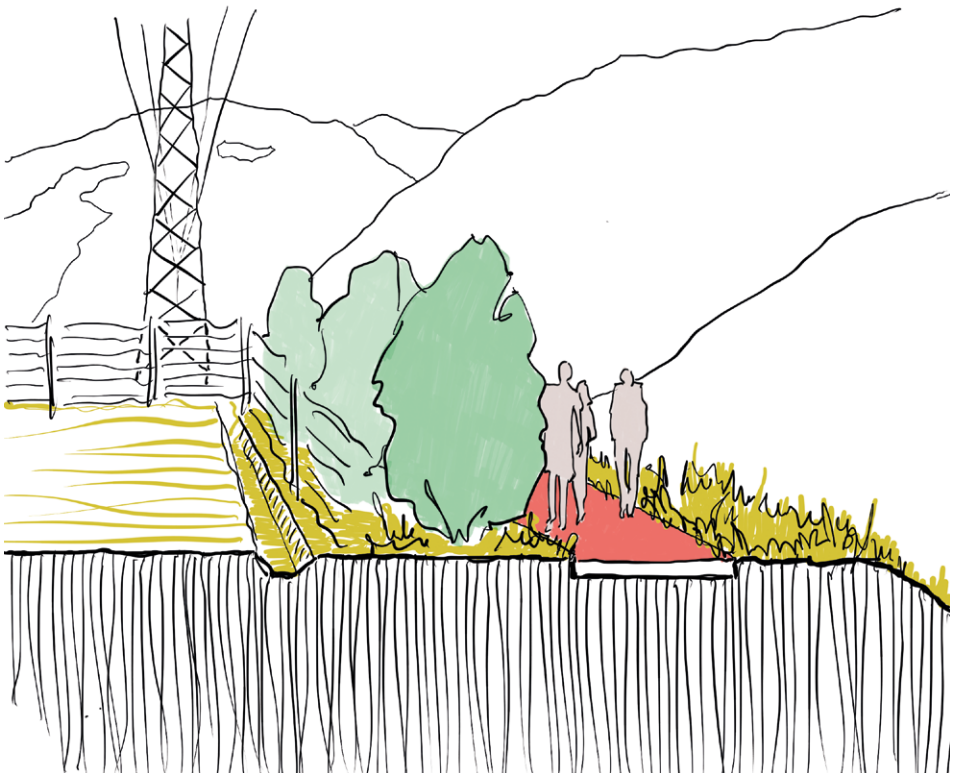

Figure 5.9 – Proposal for the practicability of the right bank of the Lëngarica and the protection of neighbouring agricultural crops.

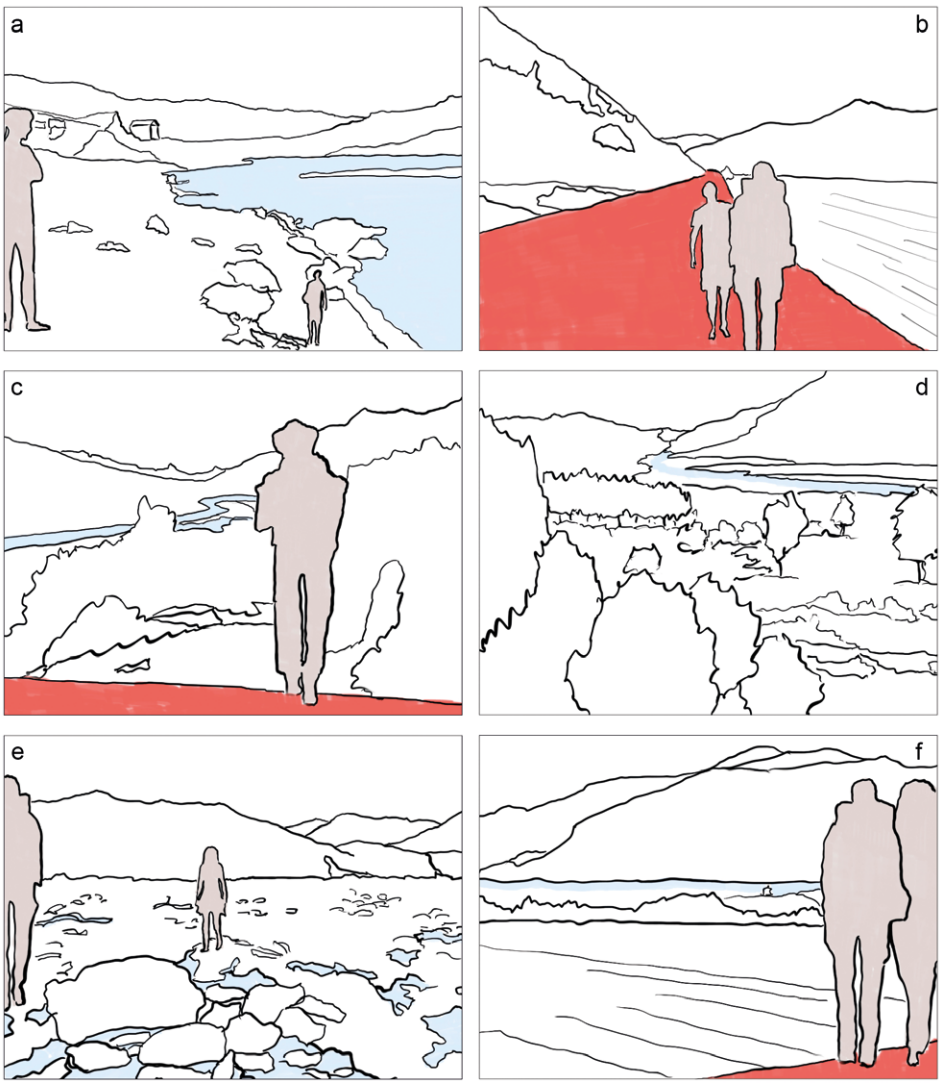

Figure 5.10 – Design suggestions for the greenway of the Lower Lëngarica Valley in the first section upstream of the mouth of the Vjosa in Petran.

sible to better understand the natural and cultural landmarks in their context and reduce the concentration of anthropic visitor pressure on them.

The valley floor road on the hydrographic right can play the role of a primary route [Figs. 5.10b, 5.11b, 5.11d] from which secondary ones branch off approaching the river. This is based on three main indications: (1) the road has very low frequencies and numbers of vehicles passing, (2) it has an elevation pattern with slopes that are not too testing for pedestrians and cyclists, and (3) it offers widespread scenic opportunities. [Figs. 5.10c, 5.10d, 5.10f, 5.11a, 5.11d] At the same time, this has two main advantages: the economy of financial resources inherent in the compatible use of an existing route is combined with that of environmental resources. The latter is equally relevant when considering how questionable the construction of new routes for tourism and recreational purposes can be when there are opportunities to use or restore compatible existing situations. The issue of compatibility is, on the other hand, a decisive variable: this very hypothesis, for example, would be completely impractical along the valley floor road bordering the Vjosa between Petran and Përmet, where the greenway would inevita-

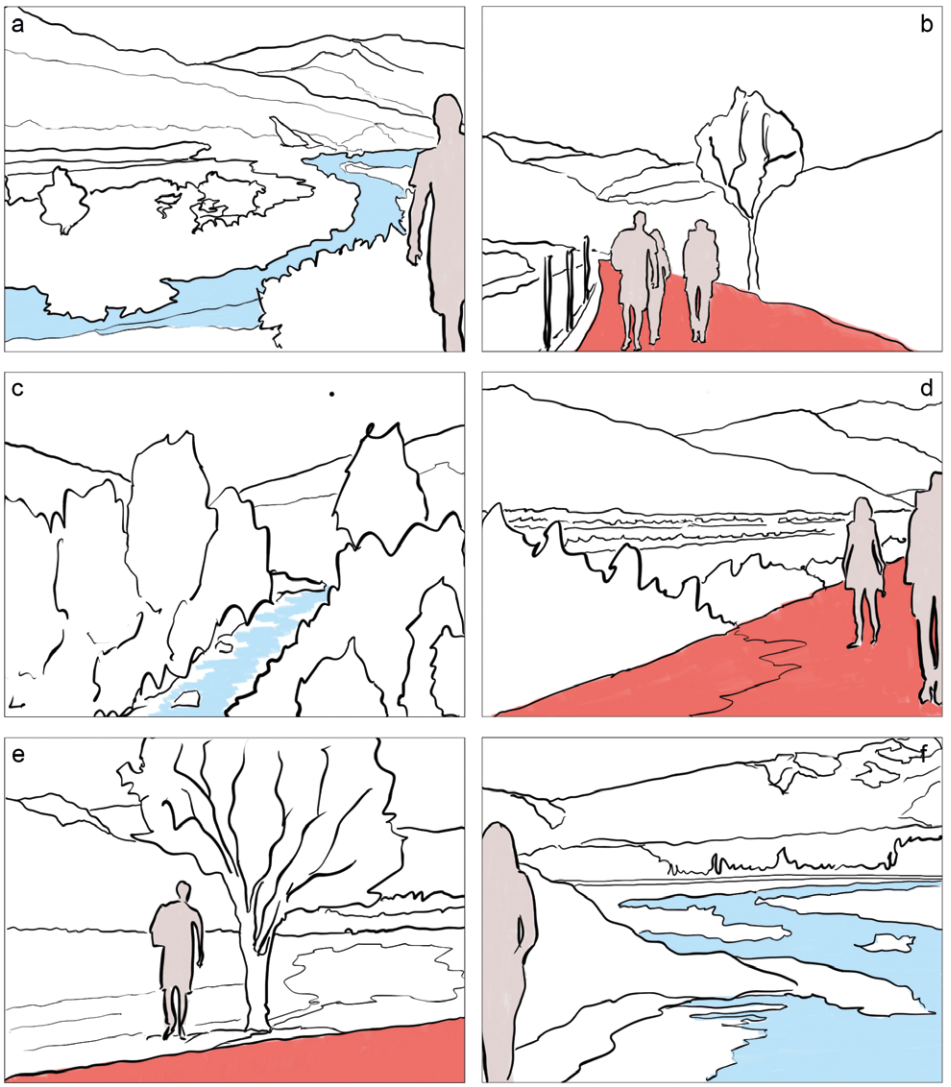

Figure 5.11 – Design suggestions for the greenway of the Lower Lëngarica Valley in the second section that passes the confluence of the Bënjë Stream Valley and reaches the thermal bath area.

bly require routes on its own roadway and whenever possible adequately separated and diverted to reduce the disturbance created by the much more intense vehicular flow.

However, some of the works have incongruous locations and characteristics, for instance the recently constructed bridge just downstream from the Ottoman bridge, the riparian and service facilities in the thermal baths area, the accommodation facilities at the end of the road on the hydrographic right near the thermal baths area, the ruins of a 20th-century building constructed on the riverbed, and a recently constructed power plant, also constructed on the riverbed a few hundred metres upstream of where the Lëngarica flows into the Vjosa. Nevertheless, in the survey conducted, the locations investigated were found to have significant overall potential with respect to the hypothesis of a greenway.

Ideally continuing along the greenway of the lower Lëngarica Valley, there are pleasant rural paths that could also be considered as potential side branches connecting the road with the river, which in some places also lead to its broad floodplains and the low-lying river bed [Figs. 5.10e, 5.11f]. Going up the Lëngarica, the main route intersects the Bënjë Stream just upstream of its confluence with the river [Fig. 5.11c] and then reaches the node [Fig. 5.11e]

Figure 5.12 – Rest area along the valley floor road, at the intersection with one of the transversal rural routes that leads to the river only a short distance away.

from which the path could connect the village of the same name with the highly attractive tourist-recreational complex consisting of the unique ensemble of the Ottoman bridge and prehistoric caves, which are related to the river and have exceptional cultural value, and the thermal springs and the canyon, with their natural value.

Lastly, the case study highlights two distinct features for the protection and enhancement of the landscapes. The first depends on the fact that greenways, designed and managed for broad enjoyment, influence the social perceptions of landscapes by contributing to the cultural construction of awareness of their values. The more extensive the resulting promotion of cultural heritage, with respect to both residents and tourists, the more local communities have a real chance of expressing effective policies and actions to counter the consumption and depletion of the natural and cultural resources on which they can base the sustainability of their own futures. This enables local communities to exercise active forms of protection that do not replace the superordinate state ones but are synergistic with them. The second distinct feature concerns the nature of the formation process typical of greenways, in which the weight of the design of works is generally subordinated to that of the identification and correlation of the resources to be protected and enhanced through forms of

conscious use. Thus, interchange areas with vehicular mobility, soft mobility routes, rest areas and service areas constitute a structural and infrastructural provision that can be achieved by utilising and restoring existing situations and networking them through a measured plan of interventions carried out from scratch. Bringing existing things back to life is a typical opportunity through which to offer visitors experiences with a magical aspect that can make a difference in the sentimental hold places have over people, even when such places are small. [Fig. 5.12]

CHAPTER 6

What future for Bënjë?

Antonio Laurìa, Pier Angelo Mori

Abstract: This final chapter aims to highlight some methodological hypotheses and preliminary considerations for the activation of a comprehensive regeneration process of the village of Bënjë and its territory. Although the ideas presented are focused on a specific territorial ecosystem, they nevertheless have several points in common with many rural areas affected by a process of strong demographic decline.

If every village, in addition to being a physical space, is a dynamic social configuration (Elias, 1982), a collection of people with a certain level of interdependence who share a place, a history, beliefs, rituals, family and social bonds and tensions, we need to ask what the community of Bënjë has become today, and where it is on the inclined plane of its history. What remains of the community's social structure and local identity? (Is it fragmented or cohesive? How is it expressed? How is it perceived?) What is the dialectic between in-group bonding and out-group bridging? What relationship do Bënjë's inhabitants have with their past?

At the start of the century, Viktor Kola, observing the conditions in his village with infinite sorrow, recalled an old Albanian saying: «In the house where there is no fire, there is also no life» (*Në atë shtëpi që s'ka zjarr, s'ka as jetë*). He, however, hoped for a reaction in those who remained. «As long as there are and will be people», he wrote, «life goes on and will continue, but dedication is required from everyone, above all the young, to preserve and maintain the values of the village, to put an end to its ruin and make it more beautiful»[1] (Kola, 2002: 256).

Unfortunately, more than twenty years later, the situation has deteriorated a lot and the young people to whom Kola appealed have almost disappeared from Bënjë.

Depopulation, which weakens the sense of community and territorial presence, is only an 'effect' of the crisis that has struck the village, not the 'cause'. The 'cause', as always in these cases, is a combination of the irrepressible human desire to aspire to a better life and the economic decline of the place where one lives.

[1] Authors' translation from Albanian.

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Antonio Laurìa, Francesco Alberti, Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli, *Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas. The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study*, © 2024 Author(s), CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1

Figure 6.1– Drawings, possibly by children, on the wall of a house in the village.

Territorial depopulation originates from and depends on a multitude of *push factors* and *pull factors* (Hagood & Ducoff, 1946) both *human* and *environmental*. Among the human factors, we can distinguish between *individual factors* (economic needs, the urge to elevate oneself socially, the desire for revenge on the other inhabitants of the place of origin, the need to achieve the plan for one's life elsewhere, the need to escape forms of discrimination, etc.) and *scenario factors* (misguided or inattentive policies, affirmation of alternative cultural models to the traditional ones, lack/shortage of infrastructure and services, loss of competitiveness of the economic system, etc.). Environmental factors include the hostile nature of the land, the harshness of the climate and natural disasters such as landslides, earthquakes and floods. (see Teti, 2014). Some factors are rooted in a circumscribed territorial area (*local factors*); others depend on *regional events* (such as wars or famines) or *global phenomena* (such as urbanisation or climate change).

What happened in Bënjë is not so different from what has been going on since the second half of the 19th century in many rural areas in European countries, areas that in recent times, in Italy, have been referred to as "inner" (Barca *et al.*, 2014). While each case is unique, their fate is guided by a common factor: comparison, both rational and emotional, with other contexts, relatively nearby geographically speaking, where there is a higher level of well-being. When the differential between real 'internal' welfare (that is, the welfare enjoyed in the place of origin) and potential 'external' welfare (that is, the level of welfare offered or seemingly offered by the place of choice) increases, the most active part of the population aspires to emigrate, triggering processes of demographic decrease and population ageing (Reynaud & Miccoli, 2016), socio-economic decline, environmental depletion and the desertification of services for people. In practice, the rise in well-being in the 'competing' areas, so to speak, entails the concomitant retreat, in relative terms, of well-being in the less developed areas.

> In order to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion, article 174 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU, 2012) commits the EU to reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions (rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions).

While the reasons why the inhabitants of Bënjë left are understandable (see Chapter 2), it is more difficult to understand the reasons why some of them stayed or returned. Perhaps when they had the opportunity to emigrate they felt or were too old and tired, perhaps they decided to return to the village after a period spent working in Greece or Italy or elsewhere, due to homesickness, to look after their church, out of respect for their dead or other unknown reasons. While each person's options are fatally limited, each individual story is unique. It would be worth listening to the voices of the inhabitants of Bënjë, one by one. Both those who left for good and those who stayed, and those who one day decided to return (see Abbot & Behrmann, 2006).

Reversing course, in any case, is far from easy. Repopulating a village is not like repopulating a wildlife island; it is naive to think of rebuilding a community based on a traditional economy that no longer exists.

So is there nothing to be done but acknowledge the decline and at best tell its story?

Firstly, it should be said that to meet this challenge, the individual initiative advocated by Kola is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. If spontaneous (*endogenous*) regeneration processes have not yet taken place in Bënjë to date, there must be a reason. The goodwill of individuals, unfortunately, can at best aspire to the goal of a mere testimony if it is not supported by an adequate material and social substrate that enables them to achieve their life goals to some extent.

In a village undergoing abandonment, an attempt to activate regeneration processes often involve outside intervention carried out by public institutions.

These institutions, before engaging in policies aimed at repopulating a village (incentivising the current inhabitants to stay and emigrants to return; attracting new inhabitants) should always ask themselves, sincerely and honestly, whether it is worth it. As a methodological premise, it is necessary to accept the idea that there are 'things' that are destined to die and disappear: this has always been the case. This means, for example, that the regeneration of a village should not be considered an action that is 'normal' and taken for granted, but rather an exceptional action to be adequately justified. Resources, by definition, are a 'scarce' good and public decision-makers must

decide where and how to allocate them. In practice, not intervening can also be a legitimate political choice, perhaps part of a broader plan to allocate available resources to other areas or other uses that are deemed more worthy and more capable of creating value and development for communities.

Moving from the general to the specific, assuming that there is the political will to give Bënjë a future (as there would seem to be from the initiatives mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book), one must reflect on how to intervene, on *what to do* and *how to do it*.

Public investment, whether from national or international sources (Albania Development Fund, World Bank, Social Development Bank for Europe, National Agencies for Development Cooperation, etc.) aimed at building infrastructure and services and renovating the existing heritage, is essential to boost the village regeneration process. In particular, it is crucial for the future of Bënjë to put an end to its isolation by improving its accessibility. The improvement of the *Rruga e Bënjës* as well as the redevelopment of the path connecting the thermal baths area to the village are, in our opinion, preparatory measures for any development hypothesis (see Chapters 3 and 4). Likewise, there is an urgent need to secure unsafe buildings, carry out a digital survey of the entire village and overcome the digital divide by ensuring information technology is available and can be accessed by its inhabitants and visitors. There is also a need to invest, from a long-term perspective, in services for people with the goal of - as Cardinal Bregantini explained with regard to the inland areas of Calabria - the interventions being effective rather than efficient (cited by Teti, 2014: 312).

The initiatives mentioned are technically defined. Their costs are easy to determine. Theoretically, if the economic resources were there, they could be achieved, but in order to initiate solid and long-lasting development processes, even *exogenous* interventions in the form of public investment alone are not enough. At the same time, the inhabitants need to play a proactive role (Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Laurìa, 2022).

Alongside actions geared towards the *material regeneration* of the territory, which consist of the redevelopment of real estate, infrastructures or land assets, it is also necessary to envisage *productive regeneration* actions in a broad sense, based on sustainable activities/processes to be carried out on the assets once they have been redeveloped, and *community regeneration* actions aimed at creating or consolidating in the inhabitants an awareness of the values expressed by the territory and at encouraging them to commit themselves personally to activities involving protection, safekeeping and enhancement[2] (see Council of Europe, 2005: art. 12, lett. D).

When public interventions focus only on material regeneration while neglecting productive and community regeneration, there is a strong risk of exposing the redeveloped asset to a new decline. This is because although public initiative is the necessary catalyst for regeneration, what makes change possible is *community activism* which allows change to take hold and produce lasting results. As many known regeneration experiences show (MISE, 2016; Burini & Sforzi, 2020), the presence of an active, albeit small, community is crucial for regeneration policies to be successful. It can be said that exogenous interventions can only save a community if it wants to save itself and takes action to do so; public intervention and community activism are, in other words,

[2] In this regard, it is worth mentioning the experience of CESVI, an Italian non-profit organisation based in Përmet, which over the years has won the trust of the local population through a variety of cultural initiatives, often funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (AICS) in Tiranë.

two sides of the same coin, they are the two legs of regeneration processes.[3]

But who or what in general can make the community 'active'? This problem is no less crucial than material regeneration, but much less defined and its outcomes are more uncertain. It could be said that 'active citizens' are not born but become so. It is objectively difficult to become one without being aware of the purposes, methods and operational tools of the forms of self-organisation that make inhabitants 'actors' in the public sphere (Moro, 2013). In other words, in order to have an active community it is necessary for communities to be aware, and awareness must be cultivated.

In a context like Bënjë, where scarce public investment and weak local resources (human, economic, information, etc.) come together, one hypothesis for designing and managing social innovation projects could be the creation of cooperatives and community enterprises (Mori & Sforzi, 2018).

Even a culture of cooperation does not emerge from nothing but must be explained and fostered through appropriate training projects, which in the Albanian socio-cultural context may come up against specific obstacles. In Albania, following the experience of forced collectivisation imposed by the communist regime, the culture of cooperation was not particularly popular. During the communist period - wrote Sokoli & Doluschitz (2019: 191) - «many so-called cooperatives in Albania have been nothing more than organs of the state or projects driven by state agents; the vital elements of self-help and commitment from the members were never part of the scheme.»

Figure 6.2 – Candles lit in the Church of St Mary.

This is not the place to examine in detail what 'community participation' consists of, that is the reactivation and provision of unused local resources and the active participation of inhabitants in governing the actions in which the regeneration process takes shape. We limit ourselves to mentioning two aspects highlighted in the literature on community enterprises (Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Mori & Sforzi, 2019, Sforzi *et al.*, 2022). On the one hand, the community is a repository of knowledge that public decision-makers usually do not have; on the other hand, it has 'resources' that can/must be mobilised to start re-

[3] This cultural approach inspires the research project REACT_"Regeneration of the cultural landscapes of inner areas from a people-centered perspective. Historic villages and rural areas of the Casentino region as an ideas' incubator of creativity and innovation". See <https://www.react-casentino.unifi.it/> (2024-04-05).

generative processes. The resources to be (re)activated include, first and foremost, work in its various forms and levels: voluntary and paid work, executive and managerial work, the latter the control functions of the inhabitants.

Then, there is the problem of numbers: when a community, as in the case of Bënjë, has reached an insignificant size, who should take charge of regeneration initiatives?

Considering the current population composition of Bënjë the gaze should inevitably be broadened to the 'extended community', to that 'conglomerate'[4] with blurred contours made up of people who have left but who still maintain links (familial, emotional, economic) with the village and people living in neighbouring towns and villages. To those who, perhaps, attend the Feast of St Mary of Bënjë on 21 November.

With reference to the 'extended community', it is necessary to ascertain whether and under what conditions these people could contribute to a regeneration process that would see the village as a single piece of an *integrated cultural system* encompassing all the (tangible and intangible) cultural resources available (archaeological sites, architectural monuments, natural assets, typical agricultural knowledge and products, gastronomic knowledge and products, craft knowledge and products, local traditions and rituals, musical heritage, etc.) (see Laurìa *et al.* 2020). Together with them, through patient and loyal dialogue, strategies and priorities for action could be defined. It would also be necessary for the villagers and the 'extended community' to be open to listening and innovation. Since human beings desire what they know, an outside look, if sincere and disinterested, can sometimes point to a new way and broaden the horizon of possibilities.

When thinking about the regeneration of villages like Bënjë, rich in scenic, historical and cultural resources, it is inevitable to think about the key role that different forms of cultural and experience-based tourism could play. Tourism may indeed represent a source of great hope for the village, above all thanks to the highly attractive setting of the nearby thermal bath area and for the beauty of the river landscape created by the Lëngarica (see Chapter 5). Kola himself (2002) saw the connection with the thermal bath area as a ray of hope for the village's future. This hope, however, could be dashed if it were to represent the only vector of regeneration and if it resulted in the musealisation of Bënjë or, worse, its transformation into a kind of holiday village for seasonal tourists.

In other words, for the future of the village, it is necessary to think of a broader regeneration strategy that also aims to activate forms of local entrepreneurship, such as, for example, those aimed at the recovery and marketing of typical food and wine products in which the Përmet area is rich (spirits such as *raki*, compotes such as *gliko*, syrups such as *shurup trëndafili*, cheeses such as *salcë shakulli*, and baked goods such as *byrek*, etc.).

In conclusion, it can be said that Bënjë has a set of qualities that make it a congenial place for experimenting with processes of material, productive and community regeneration according to an innovative people-centred vision. It could become an incubator of ideas and experiences and a pilot case for testing sustainable methods and operational tools for regeneration, which could be replicated in other rural Albanian villages (and beyond) undergoing depopulation.

If supported by policies, active community involvement, and adequate economic resources, could this vision ensure a turnaround? It is difficult to say, but it is a challenge worth attempting.

Perhaps the village's fate is not sealed, perhaps there is a future for Bënjë.

[4] van Stam (2021) introduces an interesting distinction between two social units: 'conglomerate' and 'community'. The former is defined as «a grouping of individuals to achieve a common goal» (p. 36), while the latter is «a collection of people who subscribe to a common set of values». (p. 38).

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Chapter 5

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The Florence Accessibility Lab

The Florence Accessibility Lab (FAL) is an Interdepartmental Research Unit created in 2013 following more than two decades of research into environmental accessibility and social inclusion (see https://www.dida.unifi.it/vp-136-fal.html).

The main goals of the Florence Accessibility Lab are to define, consolidate and promote a new design culture that considers environmental accessibility a great collective resource for human autonomy and well-being in order to make local communities more dynamic, safe and cohesive, exploiting architectural and landscape heritage, as well as for the development of advanced technologies for people. In short, for "Human Development", as intended by the *United Nation Development Programme*.

The cultural framework of the Florence Accessibility Lab is based on the central role of the human being in habitat transformation processes and on the need for those processes to be guided by in-depth knowledge of socio-economic dynamics and a caring attitude to commons.

The Research Unit takes an interdisciplinary approach to its research and works in a wide range of applied fields: cultural heritage, regeneration of less favoured areas, sustainable tourism, urban security and quality, urban mobility, street furniture, playground, housing adaptation, public buildings. The Florence Accessibility Lab also promotes and organises several kinds of advanced education projects (training and refresher courses, workshops, seminars, summer schools, Master's courses, etc.).

Since its creation, the Florence Accessibility Lab has hosted Italian and foreign scholars, Ph.D candidates and graduate students, all sharing a research interest in accessibility and disability. At present, the Research Unit is composed of about thirty professors from the University of Florence, belonging to the departments of Architecture (DIDA), Industrial Engineering (DIEF), Economics and Management (DISEI), Political and Social Sciences (DSPS), and Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI), and various other research fellows, contributors and consultants from both Italy and abroad.

The Florence Accessibility Lab was the defining model for other accessibility labs created in several Italian universities.

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OPERA PRIMA

Luigi Cappelli, *La fruizione inclusiva nel progetto di restauro: il caso degli anfiteatri romani. Percorsi di conoscenza e indirizzi metodologici*, Opera prima, 2023

People _ Places _ Architecture

This book presents the results of research carried out by a work team from the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, promoted and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (Tiranë). It focuses on Bënjë, a rural village in the municipality of Përmet, southern Albania. Bënjë is studied and described in relation to the surrounding territory of the upper Vjosa Valley, of the hightest landscape value. The research defines a strategy of small interventions aimed at enhancing, in the most respectful way, the natural, architectural and social resources of the area as a lever for a process of sustainable and socially inclusive development, proposing an approach to the revitalisation of rural areas that can be replicated in other similar contexts.

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ISSN 2975-0415 (print)
ISSN 2975-027X (online)
ISBN 979-12-215-0435-4 (Print)
ISBN 979-12-215-0436-1 (PDF)
ISBN 979-12-215-0437-8 (ePUB)
ISBN 979-12-215-0438-5 (XML)
DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0436-1
www.fupress.com