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Cronache di Archeologia

Scavi e ricerche 3

Edizioni Quasar

Some remarks on the fortified landscape of a border region: the case of the Kolonja plateau (Eastern Albania)

Luigi Maria Calìò, Vittorio Mirto, Giulia Raimondi

Introduction

Fortifications are objects that seem clear to understand but are extremely complex in their cultural, social, administrative, and geographical implications. Among all architectures, they are the ones most prone to over interpretation, to a reading that tends to project contemporary experiences onto the ancient world, both in terms of the different meanings they can assume and the functions strictly related to siege warfare aspects. This assumption is valid for urban contexts, where fortification works serve the dual role of defensive apparatus and monumental structures useful for self-representation, as well as in extra-urban contexts, where their function is strongly linked to the control and management of the territory¹ and its resources, while not losing their semantic component².

If one were to attempt a general reading of the phenomenon, then it is possible to assert that fortified settlements generally arise not so much due to war but to the necessary social and economic security that communities seek through the implementation of more or less complex defensive apparatuses. From this perspective, it is possible to see the fortified place as a site of exchange and contact, of the market for people and goods in particularly stimulating contexts such as the Cyclades, northern Greece, or precisely in the Balkan area³. In this way, architectural structures help, in some contexts, to

define certain societies that do not confine themselves within an autarkic economic system but project themselves on a supra-regional level through maritime routes and land routes that connect the two shores of the Mediterranean⁴. The presence of fortified settlements near the sea confirms the words of Thucydides and Plato, who linked the need to build city walls to the need to establish settlements near the coasts. Similarly, the presence of fortresses guarding the roads from the ports into the hinterland serves the same function, establishing a direct relationship with the transportation routes and especially with the productive districts, upon which the true economic capacity of a region or an entire state depends. In this sense, in certain territorial contexts, it may happen that cities have not played the role of the central pivot of the economic system, a role that may be delegated to non-urban realities, but no less articulated and complex.

Commercial networks, roads, fortresses, stations for exploiting the territory, ports, and simple loading points all belong to a model of economic development that is more rooted than a traditional view of the polis. In this context, characterized by work, production, and goods, fortifications fulfill different tasks, such as the management of the territory and its resources, or the control of land, river, and maritime routes, but they also testify to the presence of the state, the *basileus*, or some type of authority capable of guaranteeing not only their construction but also their maintenance. In other

1 Refer to FACHARD 2016.

2 Refer to CALIÒ 2017; CALIÒ 2021a.

3 So refer to the study of the fortification system of Eretria in FACHARD 2012.

4 CALIÒ 2021c, pp. 9-10.

words, fortification is also a place for sharing the territory and its resources that travel through communication routes. In some cases, and contrary to the more stereotypical image, they allow the osmosis of goods and ideas in societies where territorial and cultural boundaries are less clear-cut than what is normally expected, and where a frontier regime rather than strict borders prevails.

Fortified Landscape in Eastern Albania: a survey project

The Fortified Landscape in Eastern Albania project stems from the collaboration between the Chair of Classical Archaeology at the University of Catania and the Archaeological Institute of Tirana, directed by Luigi M. Calio and Altin Skenderaj. Its aim is to study the fortified landscape characterizing the Seman basin through an approach that goes beyond the traditional military interpretation, focusing on delineating the close relationships between defensive structures and the environmental context.

The territories traversed by the Devoll (ancient *Eordaios*) and Osum (*Apsos*) rivers boast a dense network of multi-phase fortified sites strategically located for political, military, and economic control of the territory. This results in a particularly complex overall picture, which, however, requires a better understanding of its evolution and functioning through the acquisition of additional field data. To this end, one of the main objectives of the project is to propose an organic reinterpretation of the phenomenon through a substantial update of the available archaeological documentation and the integration of new data acquired during surveys.

Specifically, this paper will address a portion of the project's study area, namely the historical region of Kolonja (fig. 1), now part of the prefecture of Korçë, investigated on three occasions between September 2021 and May 2023, through direct surveys and proximity and remote sensing. In order to better understand the territorial context of the sites, the investigations also focused on reconstructing the ancient landscape, studying the natural and anthropogenic elements that have characterized the region throughout its history. In this sense, a first step was to reconstruct the ancient road network

through the integration of legacy data⁵, field-acquired data, and the results of spatial analyses performed on GIS platforms⁶.

The historical region of Kolonja: a borderland between Illyria, Macedonia, and Epirus

The region of Kolonja is located in the south-eastern portion of Albania, covering an area of approximately 85 km², bordered to the north by the prefecture of Korça, to the east and south by Greece, and to the west by the prefecture of Gjirokastrë. From a geomorphological standpoint, the region can be divided into two distinct areas based on the locally assumed landscape characteristics. The first is comprised of the northernmost portion of the region, a plateau situated at over 1000 meters above sea level, ranging between 3 and 7 km wide and just over 15 km long, connected to the Korça plain through the Qarrit pass (elevation 1,196 meters above sea level), bounded to the east by the Gramoz massif (elevation 2,525 meters above sea level), and to the west by the upper course of the Osum river. The central area of the plateau is occupied by the town of Ersekë (elevation 1,050 meters above sea level), while several villages dot the western slopes of the Gramoz, such as Shtikë or Rehovë, or the ridges through which the Osum meanders, at the north-eastern limits of the region, such as Luaras and Qesarakë. The landscape is characterized by an alternation between rather dense mountain systems and sub-plain lands, which are concentrated especially in the northern portion of the plateau, or along the valleys of the southern portion, such as near the villages of Barmash and Radanj.

Thanks to the abundance of water and fertile alluvial lands, the region is particularly rich in natural resources, ensuring a good surface area of arable land, but above all extensive areas exploitable as pasture, distributed near the isolated heights dominating one side of the plateau, and the other the valley of the Osum, or again, along the western slopes of the Gramoz massif. The presence of extensive wooded areas still allows easy access to large reserves

⁵ Regarding the use and digitization of legacy data in archaeology, see BANNING 2002, pp. 39-79 and CASAROTTO 2022.

⁶ MIRTO 2021.

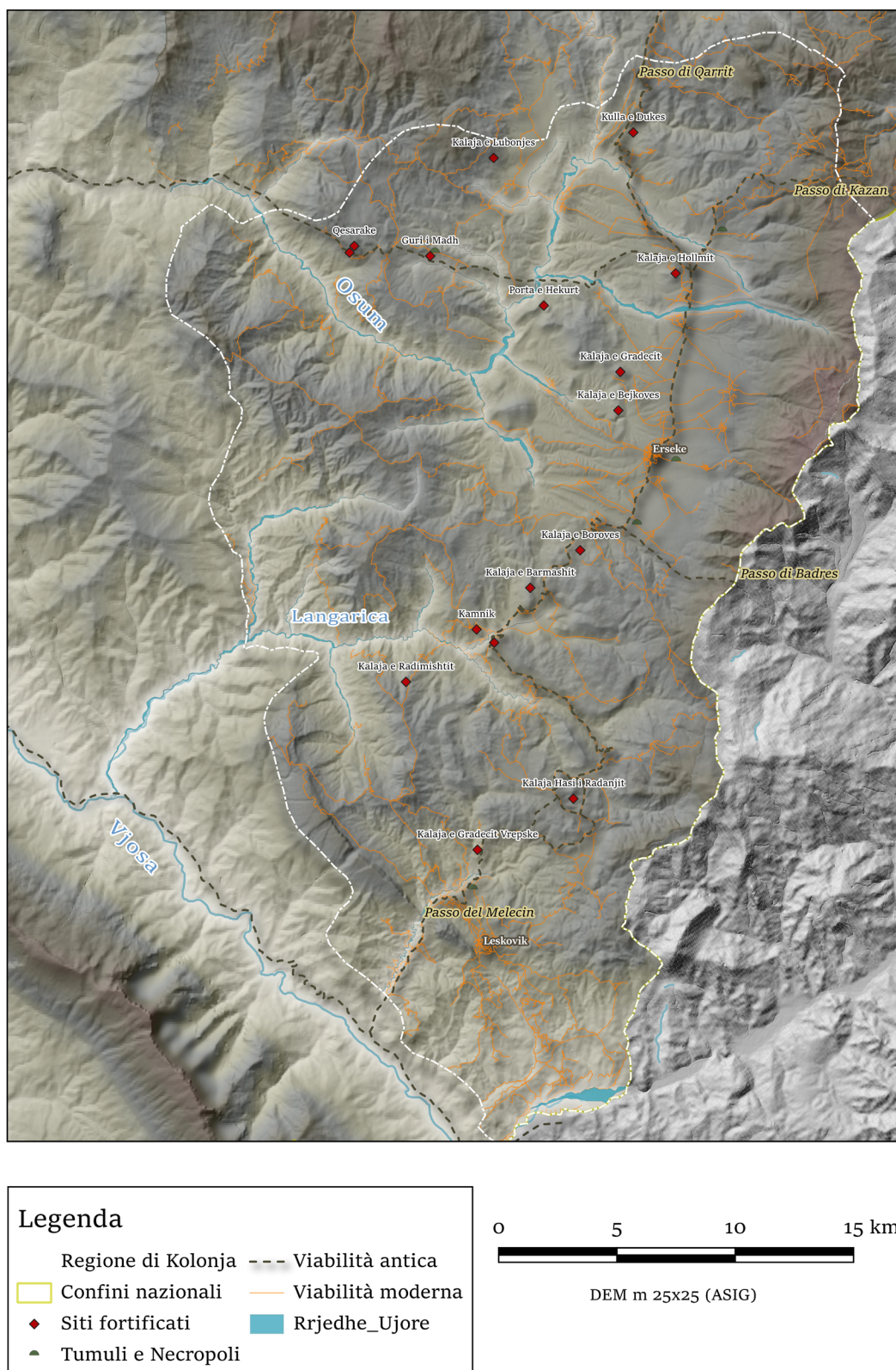


Fig. 1 - The historical region of Kolonja, highlighting known archaeological sites.



Fig. 2 - Foreground shows the mountain ridge of Postenan and the Melesin pass, with the snow-capped peaks of the Nemërçkë range in the background.

of timber today, and the exploitation of significant resources linked to productive fallow land. The ruggedness of some ridges overlooking deep valleys, typical of the southern portion of the region, contrasts with the monotony of the flat areas, broken by isolated hills, on which dominates the imposing natural barrier constituted by the Gramoz massif. Beyond the village of Borovë, about 3.5 km south of Ersekë, the plateau gives way to a succession of deep valleys delimited by steep ridges and isolated heights, to the town of Leskovik, located at the interruption in the Postenan ridge, generated by the Melesin massif (elevation 1,421 meters above sea level), through which it is possible to access the upper valley of the Vjosa (fig. 2). This geomorphological arrangement has generated a natural corridor that in ancient times must have allowed connections between the region of the Lychnidos lakes (Lake Ochrida and the lakes of Greater and Lesser Prespa) and northern Epirus, through the valleys of the Vjosa and Drino rivers. Within the organization

of ancient roads, the Korça basin must have been a fundamental hub, as north of Lake Ochrida passed the Via Egnatia⁷, to the east the routes that through the Tsangon pass and the Poloskë plain led to Macedonia⁸, and finally to the west the route from, and towards the coast, which exploited the Devoll valley. The main passes opening along the Gramoz range, once within the Kolonja plateau are the Kazan pass (Qafa e Kazanit elevation 1,832 meters above sea level) and, about 17 km further south, the Badres pass (Qafa e Badres, elevation 1,772 meters above sea level), which for obvious altitude-related reasons, must have been passable only during certain periods of the year⁹.

7 Regarding the Via Egnatia, see FASOLO 2005 and bibliography.

8 HAMMOND 1974, p. 69.

9 The French consul Pouqueville, in his work, emphasizes the strategic importance of the Kolonja region during the time of Ali Pasha, as a central point in the connections between Janina, Ochrida, and the Dibra valley. He adds that during the winter season, when the mountain passes of Pindo were impassable due to snow, the valleys of Kolonja provided a safe route to Constantinople; POUQUEVILLE 1820,

The existence of these important commercial and military routes¹⁰ is probably one of the factors that over time has most influenced the settlement dynamics of the region, both in periods of prosperity and in times of strong instability. Even today, the main road network, consisting of SH75, follows the same N-S direction, connecting the prefectures of Korça and Gjirokastër, through a route that largely exploits and follows the natural terrain using ridge roads¹¹, mountain passes, and ancient bridges, reconstructed in different epochs to cross watercourses. Another interesting element, but at the same time particularly problematic for the topographic reading of the region, is the toponymy. Numerous place names in this region seem to have Slavic origins¹² and appear largely associated with natural landscape elements, such as flora and water resources¹³, but also with anthropogenic elements such as settlements and fortified sites¹⁴. It could therefore be thought that during the Avaro-Slavic penetration into the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th century AD, these territories, like many others nearby, were subject to new settlement processes that led to a redefinition of local toponymy, overlapping with the Illyrian/Greek linguistic substrate. However, archaeological evidence related to such processes¹⁵, at the current state of research¹⁶, appears rather elu-

sive and requires a comprehensive re-examination in light of new field-acquired data.

Three case studies from the northern plateau

The sites presented below are part of a dense group of hilltop fortified settlements located along a north-south axis across the entire region of Kolonja, from the southern foothills of the Korça plateau to the upper valley of the Vjosa River. Here, we will discuss three sites located in the northern portion of the region, corresponding to the plateau that extends between the Gramoz massif and the upper valley of the Osum River. The existence of these sites is certainly primarily linked to the passage of road axes along that important natural corridor mentioned earlier, but also to the abundance of fertile flat lands rich in water and excellent for agriculture and livestock farming.

Starting with the northernmost one, the site of Hollm is located at the summit of an isolated hill (elevation 1,204 meters above sea level) behind the village of Qınam, about 8 km north of the town of Ersekë. The highest portion of the site is articulated into two ridges connected by a saddle, with the western side overlooking the course of the Osum River, while the eastern side faces the plateau and the Gramoz massif. The northern ridge is occupied by a telecommunications repeater installation, while on the southern ridge, the remains of a fortress dating back to the Imperial period (1st-2nd century AD) were identified and excavated in the late 1960s¹⁷. The walls of this fortress must have enclosed an irregular perimeter, with two square towers measuring 5x5 meters located at the edges of the northern section. An entrance was identified at the southern section and must have been defended by a small rectangular protrusion, slightly projecting from the line of the perimeter wall. The construction technique involved the use of roughly hewn small-sized stones bonded with lime mortar mixed with gravel, with walls ranging between 1.60 and 1.80 meters thick. Along the eastern and western slopes of the saddle connecting the two ridges, the remains of two stretches of dry-stone walls made of irregular

p. 53.

¹⁰ These routes must have been exploited numerous times for military purposes; see HAMMOND 1967, pp. 275-281 and HAMMOND 1972, pp. 64-65 and HAMMOND 1972, pp. 102-103.

¹¹ Regarding the modern road network traversing the region of Kolonja, only recently (May 2023) has a significant section of the new road connecting Korça and Ersekë been completed. This road includes a straight viaduct crossing the Qarrit Pass, avoiding the old road with its numerous hairpin bends and steep inclines, rejoining it near the village of Helmes.

¹² Regarding the Slavic-origin toponyms in Albania, see SELISCEV 1931 and POPOVIĆ 1984.

¹³ Regarding the relationship between the toponyms of fortified settlements and hydronyms in various Albanian and Balkan contexts, from the Roman conquest to late antiquity, see PILLON 2002 along with the bibliography.

¹⁴ For example, consider the toponyms with "Grad" (castle) like Gradecit, Gradesh, or "Voda" (water) like Bellovode or Corovode.

¹⁵ Refer to POPOVIĆ 1975.

¹⁶ This is also due to the scarcity of data and specific studies regarding the material culture of the late antique and medieval periods in these regions. Nevertheless, reference can be made to the so-called Avar Treasure of Lëngëz, less famous than that of Vrap, which appeared in a Sotheby's auction held in London in 1981. According to studies by Prof. Aliu, it was found not far from the homonymous village in the region of Kolonja. For further information, see ALIU 2020, pp. 308-310.

¹⁷ Aliu 2020, p. 98.

stonework are visible, in very poor condition, likely attributable to an earlier phase. These structures are now visible only in a collapsed state, in the form of chaotic piles of debris ranging from 4 to 6 meters wide, which nevertheless allow the reading of their straight alignment.

The material culture identified during the investigations of the late 1960s can mainly be attributed to three occupation phases predating the construction of the Imperial-era fortress.

The oldest materials belong to the Iron Age (11th-7th century BC), to which the remains of the braces closing the long sides of the saddle may likely be attributed based on analogies with other fortresses. The second period corresponds to the Archaic and Classical periods, among which stands out the discovery at the base of the hill of a deposit of 394 silver staters from the Aegina mint¹⁸, which based on its composition may have been hidden in the last decades of the 5th century BC. This is followed by a phase of the Hellenistic period with abundant material, including silver jewellery, fragments of terracotta statuettes, agricultural tools, and numerous *pithoi*, some of which bear stamps: AMYNTA¹⁹ and YTEHNA²⁰. Between the 1st and 2nd century AD, the fortress was built, certainly in relation to the nodal point of the road network located downstream from the site. The dense tall vegetation covering the entire hill prevents, even with the aid of drones, a clear reading of the structure's layout on the ground. However, thanks to the Digital Terrain Model (DTM) with a 2x2 meter resolution obtained from LiDAR data, it is possible to observe the layout of two sub-circular enclosures encircling the two ridges, and of the two braces running parallel in a north-south direction, closing the connecting saddle (fig. 3). Unfortunately, the wall remains of the ancient structures during the socialist regime period were heavily disturbed, and in some cases reused for the installation of some anti-aircraft posi-

tions and a reinforced concrete bunker with a square plan, located at the centre of the southern ridge. These installations also heavily damaged the perimeter walls of the Roman fortress, excavated and brought to light some decades earlier by Albanian archaeologists. Based on the comparison between anomalies identifiable thanks to the DTM and the data recorded in situ, it is possible to hypothesize the presence of two enclosures: one larger and sub-circular in shape that must have encircled the northern ridge, and one elliptical in shape that must have included the saddle and the southern ridge, enclosing an overall area of about 3 hectares. The resulting planimetric arrangement is characterized by the union of two (non-concentric) enclosures as happens at the nearby proto-historic fortresses of Kalaja and Bejkoves, which will be discussed shortly, or even in the fortress of Bellovode²¹, located less than 13 km north of Hollm, guarding the Qarrit pass, the main northern access route to the region, and the connection point between the Korça and Kolonja plateaus.

The site's location, besides being functional for controlling access to the plateau, just like the Bellovode site had to do for the Korça plateau, also allowed control over another route oriented east-west, connecting the Aliakmon valley with that of the Osum, through the Kazan pass and the Kolonja plateau. The antiquity of this route is also evidenced by the presence of additional multi-phase fortified sites, such as Boshanj near the southern slopes of Mali i Zi (Black Mountain, 1,698 meters above sea level)²², Guri i Madh (Luaras), Qesarake, and Bregu i Velikos²³. During the recent investigations, a stretch of paved road approximately 1 km downstream from the fortified site of Guri i Madh (the big rock)²⁴ about 1.5 km northwest of the village of Luaras was identified. The roadbed was paved with local limestone slabs and is delimited by two low walls made of larger blocks, positioned slightly raised compa-

18 The treasure found inside a bronze *oinochoe* consists almost exclusively of Aeginetan staters. For further information, see PIERRE, GJONGEÇAJ 1995, where the authors connect this discovery with the diaspora of the Aeginetans in 432 B.C. narrated by Strabo (8, 6, 16).

19 This stamp is also documented at the sites of Kamnik and Vrepcë. For further information, refer to ALIU 2020, p. 104.

20 Regarding preliminary considerations on the material found in 2021, refer to RAIMONDI 2021.

21 Refer to KARAISKAJ 1976, p. 201; KARAISKAJ 1981, pp. 15-18 and CEKA 1985, pp. 33-36.

22 Therefore, refer to KARAISKAJ 1981, pp. 62-64; KARAISKAJ 1984, pp. 93-94, and ALIU 2020, pp. 86-88.

23 These last three sites were surveyed during the May 2023 campaign and are currently under study.

24 Refer to KARAISKAJ, ALIU 1984, pp. 91-93 and ALIU 2020, pp. 79-81.

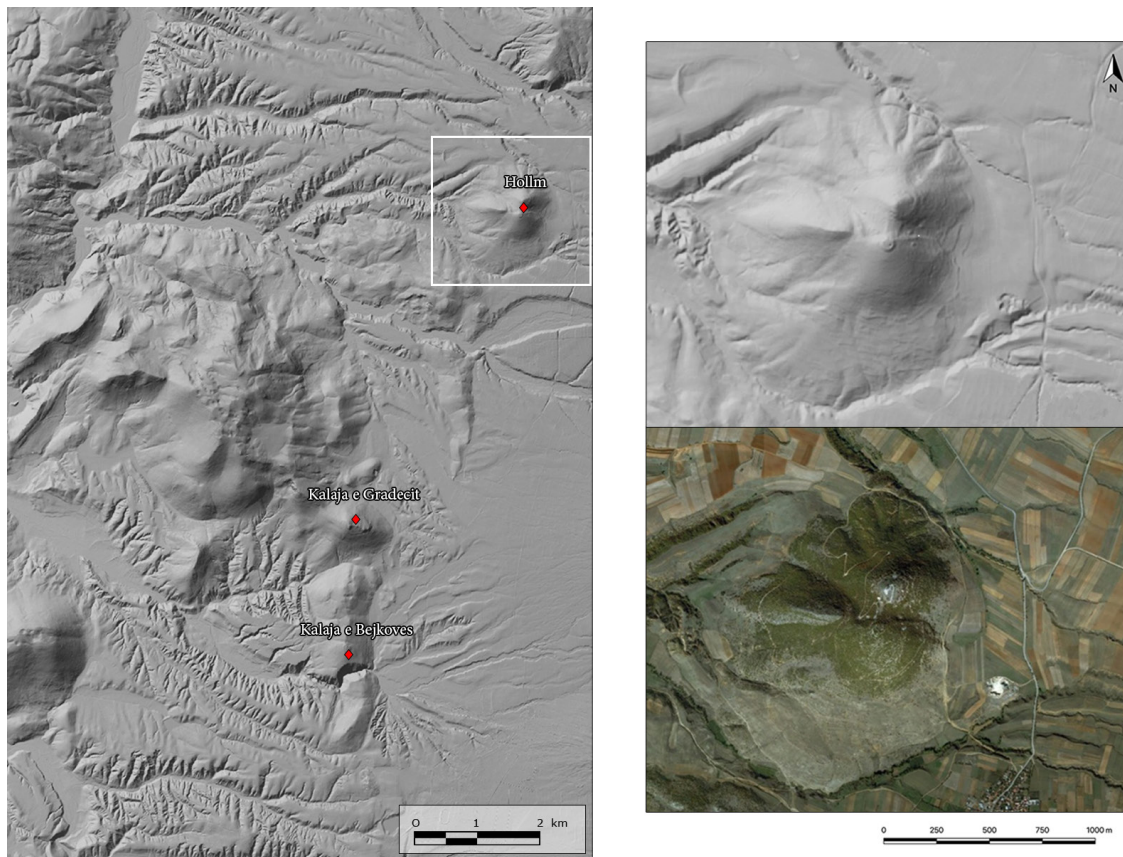


Fig. 3 - The site of Hollm: 2x2 m DTM (ASIG) where anomalies related to the presence of circular fortification walls can be detected.

red to the level of the pavement. The roadway is 3.90 to 4.20 m wide and is visible for a stretch of about 350 m (from west to east: 243+24+26+10 meters), then it presents significant gaps in both directions²⁵. This route was supposed to diverge from the main direction near the site of Hollm, heading west, passing near the present-day village of Vodice. After crossing the Osum River, it would have utilized the southern ridge of the Luaras ridge (Mali i Luarasit)²⁶, where the aforementioned paved sections are preserved, until reaching the village of Qesarke²⁷. It could then have continued northwest,

crossing the former district of Skrapar and heading to the southern foothills of the Tomorri massif, then ascending towards the Berat gorge, and finally accessing the coastal plains crossed by the Seman.

About 5 km southwest of the site of Hollm lies another isolated hill known as Maja e Gradecit (The peak of the fortress), reaching a maximum elevation of 1,197 meters above sea level, rising about 200 meters above the elevation of the SS75 road (fig. 4). The defensive structures appear to be articulated in at least 3 orders of walls arranged concentrically, enclosing an area of about 10 hectares, characterized by steep slopes and abrupt changes in elevation. The lower enclosures feature dry stone masonry with medium and large-sized blocks, with variable thicknesses ranging from 2 to 3 meters.

25 This road presents construction characteristics very similar to some sections of the Via Egnatia already described by Pouqueville and identified by Praschniker, Ceka, and Bitrakova, along the Shkumbin Valley and near Lake Ohrid. See CEKA, PAPAJANI 1972, p. 96; BITRAKOVA GROZDANOVA 1999, pp. 155-156; FASOLO 2005, p. 233.

26 The site presents at least three phases: the oldest consists of a mound dating back to the late Bronze Age, see ALIU 2004; the most recent, instead, would belong to a fortified settlement dating between the 5th and 6th centuries AD, see ALIU 2020, pp. 79-82.

27 Nearby are the remains of two other sites, namely Bregu and

Velikos, see ALIU 2020, pp. 82-84, and Kalaja and Qezarit at the summit of the rock overlooking the village, see ALIU 2020, pp. 84-86, both of which have never been investigated.

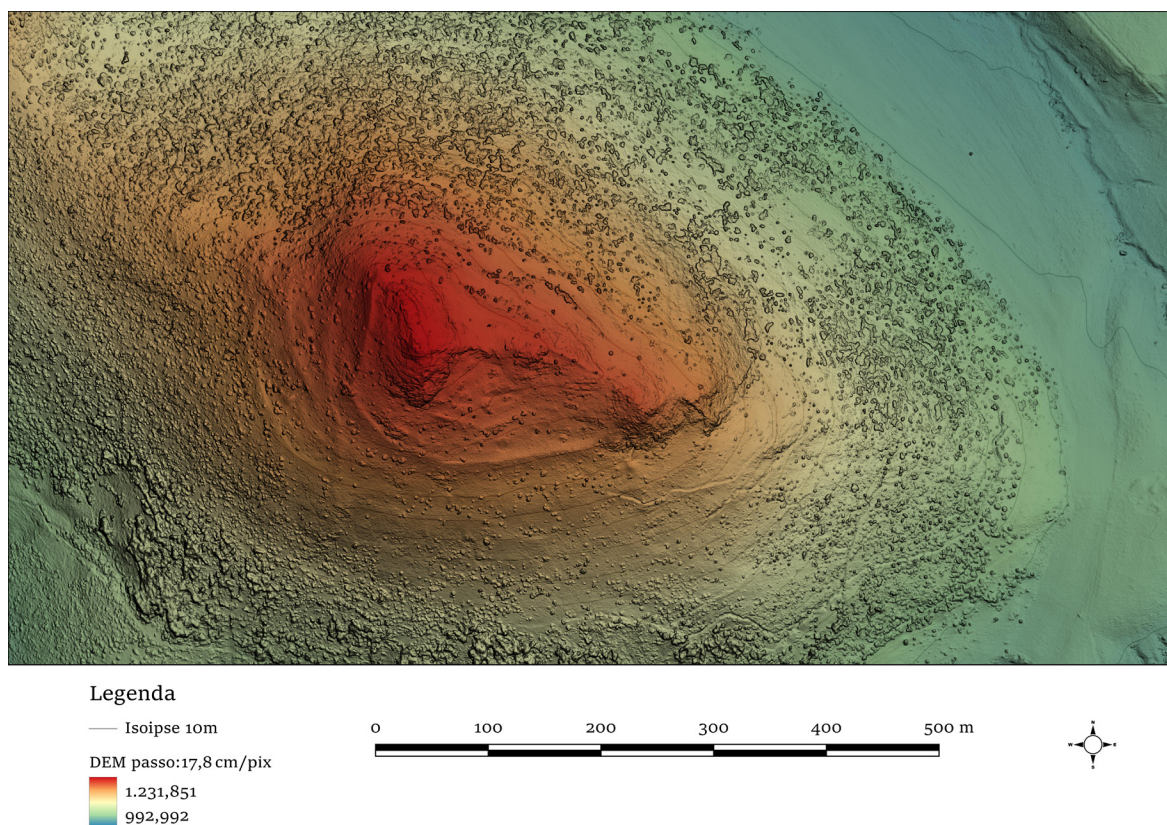


Fig. 5 - Drone-based photogrammetry DEM: convex profile anomalies belong to fortification walls; modern trenches are also clearly visible along the eastern slope.

The site has never been subjected to systematic archaeological excavations²⁸ and is extremely rich in surface finds, including numerous tiles, amphorae, large containers, and black-gloss pottery²⁹. During direct surveys, a fragment of coroplastic sculpture was also identified at the summit of the hill, interpreted as part of a lower limb covered by drapery. The earliest phases of the site may correspond to the extensive enclosure that surrounds the entire hillside (approximately 1,100 meters above sea level). The surface material culture attributable to the earliest phases consists of fragments of decorated

pottery in the Devoll style³⁰. A more recent phase between the classical and Hellenistic periods is suggested by abundant finds of material culture such as *pithoi*, plain and black-gloss pottery, and some coins of Philip II, Philip V, and Antigonos Gonatas³¹. Finally, after a probable period of abandonment, the site was certainly reoccupied in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages³². Late antique ceramics decorated with bands of wavy lines, attributable to the 5th and 6th centuries AD, belong to the late antiquity period³³.

Based on the extent of the site, its central position relative to the plateau, and the typology of the archaeological remains documented, Skender Aliu proposes to identify Kalaja e Gradecit with the city

28 S. Aliu reports on some surveys conducted in 1966, which involved the collection of surface artifacts, and a test excavation carried out in 1981 near the perimeter wall on the southern slope of the hill. The artifacts found on that occasion can be grouped into 3 main phases: the first belonging to the late Bronze Age / early Iron Age, the second from the 4th to the 1st century BC; the third to the late antiquity 5th-6th century AD; the fourth and most recent to the High Middle Ages; see ALIU 2020, pp. 93-94.

29 The material culture sampled on-site is currently under study.

30 Refer to PRENDI, BUDINA 1971, p. 167.

31 ALIU 2020, p. 278.

32 Refer to KARAISKAJ 2021, pp. 115-118.

33 For some comparisons, refer to the late antique materials found in the fortress of Symize (Korça) in KARAISKAJ 1979, pp. 175-179.

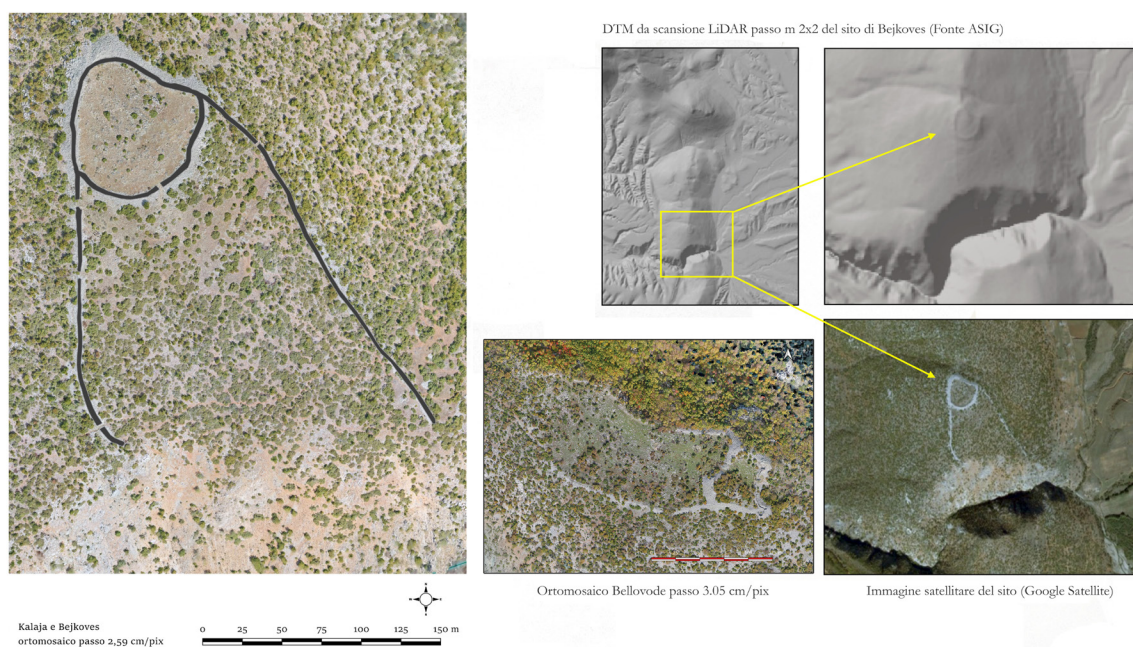


Fig. 6 - The site of Kalaja and Bejkoves; below, the nearby site of Bellovodë (Korça) for planimetric comparison.

of Koloneia, first mentioned in Byzantine sources in 1019, as an administrative, military, and episcopal centre, which later gave its name to the entire region³⁴.

In this case as well, the site's strategic position is particularly relevant, being directly related to the sub-flat portion of the plateau extending to the east, where the road network passed, while to the west, it is possible to control the course of the Osum River and maintain visual contact with the innermost fortified sites. The different phases of occupation of the site over the long term, as well as its reuse as a modern military installation, only confirm its strategic importance. Ongoing studies on the detected wall structures and the sampled material culture during surveys will be useful in further elucidating numerous aspects that are still unclear, including the site's functions and its hierarchical position within the settlement pattern of the region.

The third site, known as Kalaja e Bejkoves, takes its name from the nearby village and is located approximately 3 km south of the previous site,

occupying the southern slope of a hill (elevation 1,081 meters above sea level) called Maja e Kalasë, which in its southern portion overlooks the Virkë canyon. The fortification consists of two enclosures enclosing a total area of about 3 hectares. The first, or "upper enclosure," is sub-circular in shape, delimiting an area of 0.5 hectares, while the second, or "lower enclosure," is triangular in shape, enclosing an area of 2.75 hectares. Both enclosures feature the same construction technique with medium and large-sized blocks laid in dry stone and with a battered profile. The width ranges from 2.40 meters for the lower enclosure to 2.75 meters for the upper enclosure, and the wall structures are preserved to a maximum height of about 1.40 meters. Interestingly, the planimetric layout of the fortification shows very close similarities with the nearby site of Bellovodë located further north, at the hinge point allowing passage from the plain of Korça to the Kolonja plateau through the Qafa e Qarrit (fig. 6).

The upper enclosure has a communication gap with the lower one located at the centre of its southern stretch. The lower enclosure, on the other hand, has at least three accesses on the western slope, the

34 ALIU 2020, p. 94.

first two being 1.75 meters wide, the southernmost one being 1.50 meters wide, and at least one on the eastern side, located approximately one-third of the length of the perimeter wall, 1.50 meters wide. Inside the upper enclosure, the remains of some dry stone structures with a square plan can be distinguished, in a very poor state of preservation³⁵. The situation is different for the lower enclosure, where no traces of wall structures seem to have been preserved, and the rocky outcrop is not even levelled in many places.

The visible surface material culture is rather rare and in very poor condition. The site seems to have been spared from the disturbances caused by modern military activities, except for a square structure built into the thickness of the walls along the eastern sector of the upper enclosure, the excavation of a tunnel, and a trench both made halfway down the eastern slope of the hill, which fortunately did not affect the ancient wall structures. Based on the planimetric articulation of the fortification, one could hypothesize a connection with a community interested not only in defending its members but also in protecting herds and livestock, which could have found space within the extensive lower enclosure. Finally, more than the defensive capabilities³⁶, what strikes about this site are the monumentality of the wall structures and the choice of a less defensible location compared to others nearby, but certainly well visible from the surrounding plain.

Transitioning from protohistoric defensive models to the novel demands of Late antiquity

Regarding their later chronological phases, the investigated sites present defensive wall structures built following a very similar logic, with fairly homogeneous planimetric and structural character-

istics. It seems evident, from the ubiquity of this type of settlements, that they must have played a prominent role in the control and management of the territory and its roadways. In this scenario, fortified sites, in addition to performing purely defensive functions, must have represented centres of reference endowed with political, social, and economic functions, around which the settled communities in the surrounding area coalesced. Fortified settlements, besides guarding important road junctions, always appear in close relation to mountain pastures and the fertile sub-flat areas along watercourses' margins. However, what is still not clear enough is the dimension of the "domestic" component of these settlements and the definition of their possible additional functions, besides the purely defensive ones. It is likely that only some sites encompassed residential spaces within the walls, while in other cases, settlements had to find a place in the immediate vicinity, almost certainly maintaining a relationship of inter-visibility with the nearest fortified site (fig. 7).

The walls could also incorporate communal structures to store and defend resources, as well as several livestock, and perhaps even accommodate specialized artisans, given the significant number of ceramic and metalworking slag found during the surveys³⁷. This model, clearly reminiscent of territory management by tribal communities, seems to be characterized by a long continuity in the Kolonja region, interrupted only in the Roman era when defensive needs, even in frontier territories like the one in question, likely waned, leading to the abandonment of hilltop sites in favour of more accessible areas better connected by roadways. At the current state of research, for the Kolonja region, we do not have archaeological evidence attributable to a hegemonic pseudo-urban centre, generated following the conurbation processes of the various communities scattered throughout the territory, which instead between the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE laid the groundwork for the emergence of important urban centres along the coasts and in the immediate hinterland of Illyria, or in other regions of Epirus. Therefore, following an initial analysis re-

35 During surveys conducted by Albanian scholars, materials dating from the late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age were discovered. According to these studies, the fortification was believed to have been erected between the 11th and 10th centuries BC. For more information, see KARAISKAJ, ALIU 1984, pp. 81-83 and ALIU 2020, pp. 94-95.

36 Compared to other fortified sites in the region, Kalaja and Bejkoves do not have particularly steep slopes or naturally well-defended points, except for the southern slope overlooking the Virkë canyon, where, for this reason, it does not seem that the perimeter wall was built. However, the slope is affected by significant erosive phenomena, which may have caused the collapse of any southern section of the defensive structures.

37 At the Kamnik fortress, during the excavations directed by conduits in the late 1960s, several ceramic firing kilns dating back to the late Neolithic period were identified. For more information, refer to PRENDI, ALIU 1971.

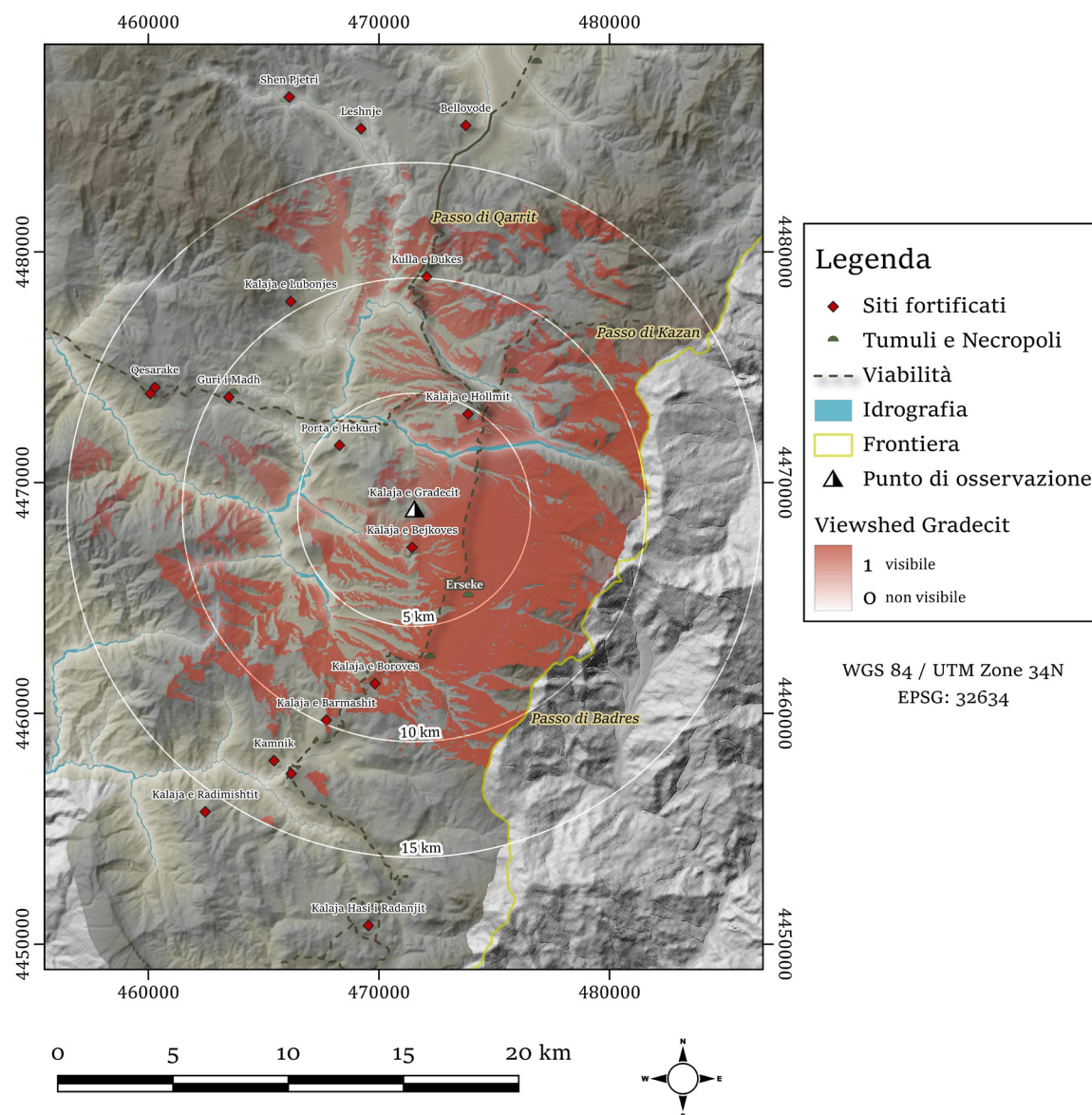


Fig. 7 - Viewshed analysis from the summit of Kalaja e Gradecit, located in the central part of the Kolonja plateau.

garding the architectural characteristics of the sites, what strikes is the absence of defensive works built according to the canons of Hellenistic siegecraft³⁸. It seems that fortified settlements that emerged between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, following models and needs specific to those epochs, did not

undergo significant structural changes during subsequent reoccupations.

Thanks to the results of the latest archaeological investigations conducted in the neighbouring areas, we know that territorial contexts such as the Vjosa Valley³⁹, the Drino Valley⁴⁰, the coastal sector of Chao-

38 Refer to GARLAN 1974; LAWRENCE 1979.

39 CALIÒ, BRANCATO 2020.

40 PERNA, ÇONDI 2012, pp. 67-102; PERNA 2022.

nia⁴¹, or even the inland territories of Thesprotia and Molossia⁴², during the Hellenistic period were repeatedly affected by programs of territorial militarization promoted by major settlement entities such as Phoinike, Byllis, and Amantia, or directly by the *basileus* such as Antigonea or Beronice⁴³, and in any case by the precise will of Hellenistic dynasts. These processes led to the creation of articulated networks of fortified sites equipped with complex defensive apparatuses adopting high-profile siegecraft solutions, sometimes expressed through monumental architectures. Therefore, the semantic function⁴⁴ and, more likely, the precise intention by a political entity to remodel the fortified landscape should not be underestimated, aiming to manifest authority through a system of defensive works erected according to a somewhat “standardized” and recognizable model⁴⁵. These same processes do not seem to have been triggered in the Kolonja region, where neither the planimetric layout nor the individual defensive apparatuses underwent “updates” aimed at adapting the fortified works to Hellenistic age models⁴⁶.

In this case, it is not the traces of occupation of the fortified sites that are lacking, as abundant Hellenistic material culture is found in them, not compatible with mere visitations. During the early imperial age, the archaeological evidence found in this type of sites appears rather sparse, providing only sporadic indications of their use. It is likely that during these phases, the relative political stability combined with the marginality of the hilltop sites determined their de-functionalization, although the importance of the road axes crossing the region must have somehow been maintained⁴⁷. In such a

scenario, the occupation of these sites may have become seasonal, tied to the needs of what still today is one of the main forms of exploitation of the territory, namely silvo-pastoral economy. It is worth remembering that due to the abundance of summer pastures, the Kolonja region was a fixed destination in the routes of long-distance transhumance until the first decades of the last century. Studies by A. Blanc on the evolution of pastoralism in Albania⁴⁸ document this phenomenon practiced by semi-nomadic shepherd communities wintering along the coasts of Epirus, moving towards the inland regions with the arrival of spring (fig. 8).

However, for earlier epochs, short-distance transhumance forms could be considered⁴⁹, although the monumentalization of the fortifications from the protohistoric age suggests a more complex economic system in relation to the viability of this area. The lack of an update to the fortifications can also be explained by the desire to maintain ancient monumentality in relation to forms of social memory that invest old monuments with new meaning. The close relationship between viability and fortifications obliges us to reflect more on the routes that the fortified architectures make imposing. The majestic walls overlooking the path from above serve to manage the road but also to make tangible the presence of local lords. The creation of fortified complexes in the district under examination is, however, only the last episode of an increasingly visible presence along the valley floor routes, with the construction of large monumental mounds marking the way already during the Bronze Age and the presence of Neolithic pottery in hilltop sites linked to a complex settlement system. All this apparatus presupposes the importance of the road systems in this area, which may need to be read within a broader network of routes that occupy the area around Pindus and connect the Macedonian coasts with the Adriatic area, an isthmian route that, as in other regions of the Mediterranean, guarantees the passage of people and goods.

A new reoccupation of the hilltop sites must have occurred during late antiquity, especially between

41 GIORGI, BOGDANI 2012.

42 GEROGIANNIS 2021.

43 Plut., *Pyr.* 6.1.

44 Refer to CALIÒ 2017 and CALIÒ 2021b.

45 CALIÒ 2021b, pp. 27-28.

46 Regarding the preliminary data on the material culture found during the first campaign of the project, refer to RAIMONDI 2022.

47 Note the presence of at least two monumental tombs carved into the rock outcrop: the first, located in the southern portion of the region, not far from Leskovik and therefore from the access to the Vjosa Valley, known as “Varri i Krajlit,” measuring 2 meters long by 0.80 meters wide. It was violated in ancient times but with surface material dating between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. The second tomb, located along the road connecting the plateau with the Kazan Pass, called “Guri i Sendyqit,” is 2.30 meters long and 0.90 meters wide. Given its proximity, it could be related to the site of Hollm (3rd-4th century AD). For information on the two monumental tombs, see ALIU 2020, pp. 237-240.

48 Regarding this topic, see BLANC 1963.

49 Regarding the application of this model to the historical region of Arcadia, refer to CARDETE 2019.



Fig. 8 - A flock of sheep grazing near the site of Hasi i Radanjit (protohistoric fortified village).

the 5th and 7th centuries AD, when these territories were affected by massive incursions by Avaro-Slavic populations coming from the Danubian regions. Such incursions and the consequent processes of occupation of the territory by new communities must have created quite a few moments of instability, so the hilltop sites again became the keystone of the settlement arrangement of the region. The Slavic presence in the territory is testified by the persistence of numerous place names⁵⁰, largely associable with natural elements of the landscape⁵¹. However, the formation of a new linguistic substrate that will have a significant impact on the toponymy of the territory must have been a longer and more articulated process, certainly continuing during the course of the following centuries in rela-

tion to the political events related to the first Bulgarian Empire⁵².

The settlement arrangement that the region must have assumed during the Middle Ages is still rather difficult to reconstruct due to the substantial lack of studies in this regard. Apart from the faint traces left by the fortified settlements, the only archaeological data available for these chronological phases can be inferred from the burials that reuse the protohistoric mounds, as in the cases of Prodan⁵³, Shtickës⁵⁴ and Rehovës⁵⁵; a particularly interesting phenomenon that will be further explored in the research activities related to the project.

Thanks to the sources, we know that following the Byzantine conquest of Bulgaria, during the first decades of the 12th century, Emperor Basil II created

50 Regarding the toponymy of Slavic origin in Albania in general, see SELIŠČEV 1931 and POPOVIC 1984.

51 For a study investigating the connection between the toponymy of fortified sites and hydronyms in various Albanian contexts and the Balkans in general, from the Roman conquest to late antiquity, refer to PILLON 2002 along with bibliography.

52 W. M. Leake, during his journey in the region of Korça, mentions some mountain villages where the inhabitants speak the Bulgarian language and the presence of toponyms clearly of Bulgarian origin (LEAKE 1835, pp. 341-342).

53 ALIU 1984.

54 ALIU 1996.

55 ALIU 2012.



Fig. 9 - Series of bunkers excavated on the southern slope of a hill near the village of Vodice, along the upper Osum valley.

a new theme called Κολώνεια, where he resettled prisoners of war in order to strengthen the Byzantine frontier against possible attacks from the Macedonian area⁵⁶. In the following centuries, the territories of Koloneia were first incorporated into the Duchy of Durazzo and then ceded to the Republic of Venice before passing under the control of the Despotate of Epirus. After losing the Battle of Pelagonia, this sector of the Balkans briefly passed to the Empire of Nicaea before the final Ottoman expansion. Finally, as already mentioned, in modern times many of these sites were occupied by military positions. This phenomenon, while unfortunately resulting in the almost total loss of important archaeological contexts (the most emblematic cases are surely Hollm and Kalaja e Gradecit), on the other hand, allows us to observe the persistence

of the strategic importance of some sites which, beyond historical and political changes, and with due fluctuations, remained key points in the military and settlement arrangement of this district for a long time (fig. 9).

Final Remarks: Ancient routes in Kolonja and the processes of Mediterranean connectivity

The data emerging from the examination of a unified district like that of Kolonja can be interpreted in a broader context. The road that crosses the region, due to its monumentality, seems to go far beyond the level of local economy that is often envisaged; marked by imposing fortified structures and territory markers such as the tumuli from the Middle Bronze Age, it becomes a space of social representation by structured communities with extensive technological capabilities. Therefore, it

⁵⁶ Refer to PRINZING 1997.

becomes important to understand the functions and modalities of this strong anthropization of the territory, which integrates fortified architecture, funerary monuments, and road networks that, even if structured at different times by the end of prehistory, constitute an integrated system with high semantic impact.

In fact, the road that crosses Kolonja belongs to an internal road system that unfolds in an important region that connects northern Aegean to the southern Adriatic coast. The rediscovery of this ancient route, which reached its peak between the 12th and 9th centuries BC, but which must have been frequented at least since the Middle Bronze Age, proposes a different vision of Mediterranean connectivity, integrating mixed routes that include isthmian and maritime paths, as also documented in southern Italy and Sicily, according to an integrated model that combines maritime routes and land paths.

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SUMMARY - The historical region of Kolonja is located in south-eastern Albania, bordering Greece, and its territory now falls within the larger prefecture of Korça. It is a typical context of inland Albania, characterized by rugged terrain traversed by deep river valleys, which in some areas give way to fertile sub-plain lands rich in natural resources. The geographical position is particularly strategic because, both today and in antiquity, it allowed connections to the north and west with the controlled territories of the Illyrian tribes, to the east with Macedonia, and to the south with Epirus. The presence of natural corridors exploiting the river valleys, combined with the abundance of natural resources, must have been the two main factors in the development of the territory since ancient times.

In this sense, the presence of a dense network of hilltop fortified sites dating from the end of the Bronze Age to the Iron Age testifies to an important phase of territorialisation with often monumental architectural outcomes. However, while the remains of fortified works from the pre and protohistoric phases are evident, this is not the case for the later phases, as there are no material signs of a reorganization of the fortified structures based on Hellenistic siege warfare models. Nevertheless, the discovery of Hellenistic pottery in several older sites seems to indicate continuous habitation. These same sites, after a phase of deactivation following the Roman conquest, will regain fundamental importance for the settlement pattern of the region in the late antique period, when the pressure exerted by Avaro-Slavic populations throughout the Balkan Peninsula will generate new defensive needs.

Through the examination of three case studies, the subject of direct and indirect surveys within the activities of the project "Fortified Landscape in Eastern Albania," this paper proposes a preliminary framework of the fortified landscape that characterized the region from protohistory to late antiquity.

RIASSUNTO - La regione storica di Kolonja si trova nell'Albania sud-orientale, a confine con la Grecia, e il suo territorio rientra oggi nella più ampia prefettura di Korça. Un contesto tipico dell'entroterra albanese, caratterizzato da un paesaggio impervio solcato da profonde valli fluviali, che in alcune aree lascia il posto a fertili terreni sub-pianeggianti, ricchi di risorse naturali. La posizione geografica risulta particolarmente strategica perché oggi come in antico doveva permettere i collegamenti a nord e ovest con i territori controllati delle tribù illiriche, ad est con la Macedonia, e a sud con l'Epiro. La presenza di corridoi naturali che sfruttano le valli fluviali, unita all'abbondanza di risorse naturali, devono essere stati i due principali fattori di sviluppo del territorio fin dalle epoche più remote.

In questo senso la presenza di una fitta rete di siti fortificati d'altura databili tra la fine dell'età del bronzo e l'età del ferro, testimonia una importante fase di territorializzazione con esiti architettonici spesso monumentali. Tuttavia, se i resti delle opere fortificate delle fasi pre e protostoriche risultano evidenti, così non è per le fasi più tarde, in quanto risultano assenti i segni materiali di una riorganizzazione delle strutture fortificate, in base a modelli poliorcetici più aggiornati. Nonostante questo, la ceramica ellenistica rinvenuta in diversi siti più antichi sembra testimoniare una frequentazione continua. Gli stessi siti, dopo una fase di defunzionalizzazione avvenuta in seguito alla conquista romana, torneranno a rivestire un'importanza fondamentale per l'assetto insediativo della regione in età tardoantica, quando la pressione esercitata dalle popolazioni avaro-slave in tutta la penisola Balcanica genererà nuove esigenze difensive.

Attraverso l'esame di tre casi studio, oggetto di prospezioni dirette e indirette nell'ambito delle attività del progetto *Fortified Landscape in Eastern Albania*, si propone di seguito un primo inquadramento del paesaggio fortificato che dovette caratterizzare la regione tra la protostoria e la tarda antichità.

Parole chiave: Albania, Kolonja, Fortificazioni, Età del Ferro, Età Ellenistica.

Keywords: Albania, Kolonja, Fortifications, Iron Age, Hellenistic Age.