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PELASGIC ENCOUNTERS IN THE GREEK-ALBANIAN BORDERLAND

Border Dynamics and Reversion to Ancient Past in Southern Albania

*Gilles de Rapper*

This article is an attempt to understand the impact of changes in the borderland between Greece and Albanian after 1991. More precisely, it relates the recent success of some ‘ideas’ about the ancient past of the area with the state of social relations between Albanians and Greeks as they are experienced by local inhabitants of the borderland. Established in 1913 as a boundary between two national states, the Greek-Albanian border came to separate two geopolitical blocks during the Cold War and became an external border of Europe in 1981 when Greece joined the European Community. Its ‘global’ function (Balibar 2005: 126) was however mostly activated after 1991, when huge numbers of Albanian migrant workers crossed the border and entered Greece. It is now a gate into Europe for many migrants and, as such, its crossing is strictly controlled.

In the first part of this paper some examples of border crossings are used to reveal central features of the border and of how it functions, between the local and the global level. The borderland appears as a place of fluidity and fragmentation, where national categories are questioned; but also as a place where economic inequality and political domination are experienced in everyday life. From this starting point I will then address the issue of reversion to ancient past, through the example of what can be called the ‘return of the Pelasgians’ as ancestors of modern Albanians. Here the argument will be that the vitality of the Pelasgic theory since the mid 1990s is closely connected to the new situation created across the border. This Pelasgic theory can be seen as both a product and a producer of ambiguity in the borderland and as a response to new social relations across the border.

## **Pelasgians in Southern Albania**

In August 2001, as I was visiting one of the recent (post-1991) neighbourhoods of the city of Gjirokastër, I met Mr. A, a new inhabitant of this quarter. He asked me if he could help me find my way in the neighbourhood and we started talking, eventually sitting for a coffee. Mr. A was from the village of Zhulat, half-an-hour from Gjirokastër, and worked as a math teacher in town. Like many other families from the villages of Kurvelesh, a mountainous area north of Gjirokastër, Mr. A had come to the city in the early 1990s, when the fall of the Albanian dictatorship made the living conditions in the remote villages even worse than what they had been in the last years of communist rule. We talked about my research and my interest in the border with Greece. Mr. A told me he had only a limited experience of the border, but that it was worth being heard. In 1994, he said, like many other young men, his son went to Greece. Months passed and his parents, not hearing from him, became more and more worried. Mr. A decided to go and look for his son in Athens. He got a one-month tourist visa from the Greek consulate in Gjirokastër and crossed the border. He was eventually arrested by the police in Athens after one month of unsuccessful search.

I was not ill-treated, he said, but I was wondering why they arrested me: I am neither Black nor Arab, and I was doing nothing wrong. But something interesting happened: there was a map on the wall of the office where they kept me, in the police station; the policeman asked me to show him on the map where the border was, according to me: in Arta or on the Shkumbin?

The policeman's question might be surprising for someone not familiar with Greek-Albanian relations over their common border in Epirus. It is in a way revealing of the role of maps in the representations of national space, a map which appears as a medium between Mr. A and the policeman. It expresses opposed representations of national spaces which are nonetheless known by both interlocutors, who share a common knowledge of what place-names like Arta and Shkumbin actually mean. Arta is a city in north-western Greece and it is known to be the southern limit of Albanian nationalists' claims on Greek territory in Epirus. These claims are part of what is known as the 'Cham question', one of the issues which contribute to make the Greek-Albanian border a sensitive one. The region between the border and Arta is considered by Albanians as 'national soil' that was given to Greece in 1913 when the border was drawn. The Muslim inhabitants of the region, or Muslim Chams, were later expelled from Greece, at the end of the Second World War. The Albanian government, pressed by the Chams living in Albania, would like to discuss the issue with Greece, especially regarding financial compensation for lost properties, but Greece considers the question closed (Kretsi 2002, de Rapper & Sintès 2006). By answering 'Arta,' the name of a Greek town claimed by Albanian nationalists, Mr. A was presenting himself as a nationalist, a supporter of the Cham question, and was thus taking the risk of being classified with the less wanted Albanian visitors in Greece.

The other answer proposed by the policeman, the river Shkumbin, appears as the opposite of the first one. The river Shkumbin is the northern boundary of Northern

Epirus, which is the name given in Greece to Southern Albania as a part of Epirus, considering it as a Greek land unduly attributed to Albania in 1913. According to Greek nationalists, Northern Epirus is inhabited by Greeks. Albanians oppose this version by stating that Greeks in Albania live in limited areas in a couple of districts. All other inhabitants of Southern Albania are Albanian, either Muslim or Christian. These claims on 'Northern Epirus' are still considered by many Albanians as a serious threat on national territory and integrity. The Greek minority in Albania is thus another contested issue between the two countries (de Rapper and Sintès 2006). By answering 'Shkumbin,' the northern border of Northern Epirus claimed by Greeks, Mr. A had a chance of being classified as a member of the Greek minority in Albania, for whom it is possible to go and work in Greece: they enjoy a privileged access to Greece as *homogeneis*, or members of the Greek national community (Tsitselikis 2009).

The answer he actually gave to the policeman – or said he actually gave – illustrates the use that can be made of the border ambiguity, of the fact that, whatever the state control on the border may be, the border is supposedly unable to separate what cannot be separated: 'I told him, he said, that the Greek and the Albanian languages have 2000 words in common. I told him that Northern Epirus exists, but it is neither Greek nor Albanian; Northern Epirus has been a multiethnic state.' According to him, this means that the question of the border is not a question of being Greek or Albanian, that the border is artificial and imposed from above on a 'multiethnic' reality in which all groups, including the Muslim – to which he himself belongs – should have the same rights. In the course of the discussion, Mr. A explained me that in ancient times, 'before Muslims and Christians started to fight', the whole area practised a common pagan religion. He explained that even later in history the border was not a barrier between nations as it is today: his own father, a Muslim from Albania, spoke Greek and used to trade on the Greek side. Unfortunately, this 'multiethnic' reality is forgotten today, as national and religious boundaries are imposed on the inhabitants of the borderland: that is why Albanian migrants change their names when they work in Greece. With a Muslim name, Mr. A explained, you get only a one-month visa, as he did in 1994, while with a Christian name you can have a one-year or five-year visa.

On the next day, I move to Lunxhëri, a small region of a dozen villages settled on the slopes of the mountain facing the town of Gjirokastër. A celebration was taking place in front of the war monument commemorating the creation of a local partisan unit during the Second World War in a small village that used to be the centre of a State farm and is now the centre of one of the administrative units of the region. After several speeches by officials and veterans, I was invited to join a small group of people rejoicing around a table full of roast lamb and beer. We talked about the border. Although villages of Lunxhëri are separated from the border by other villages, as stated the head of the local police station, many of its inhabitants cross the border to work in Greece. They already did so in the past, before the border was closed in 1944. This old migration, called *kurbet*, is said to be responsible for the high level of 'culture' (i.e. 'development') of the region, compared to others (de Rapper 2005). A couple of historical figures of that time (end of 19<sup>th</sup> century) originated from Lunxhëri and the region hosted famous schools at a time when education

had not yet spread in rural areas. My interlocutors however warned me: those schools were Greek schools; they were funded by Greece and had a political aim. As a region populated mainly by Orthodox Christians, Lunxhëri belongs to what the Greeks call Northern Epirus and they had an interest in favouring the Hellenisation of this Albanian speaking population. The Greek influence, they added, is still visible today in the area as well as all over southern Albania: after the ban on religion was lifted in 1990, churches were rebuilt and restored with financial support coming from Greece. While Christians and Muslims enjoy peaceful coexistence in Albania, some ‘foreigners’ arrived at that time and attempted to set one religion against the other. Just like Mr. A the day before, my interlocutors, who were all Muslims, complained that it was difficult for Muslims to get visas and working permits for Greece. ‘You always need to bribe them; you always need to change your name for a Greek one if you want to find a job’, complained a lady who had spent five years in Athens and whose husband worked as an icon painter in Greece. At that moment, the local police chief suggested that the subject of our conversation was becoming too political and that we should talk about something else.

So we talked about ancient history. Someone said that many names in Homer’s poems had no meaning in Greek but could be easily explained in Albanian. A veterinarian said that Achilles had been buried according to principles which are still in use in the customary law of some parts of Albania and notably in Kurvelesh, a mountainous area above Gjirokastër. Even the name of the French city Marseille is ‘explained’ by Albanian words, he argued: doesn’t it come from Albanian *marr*, which means ‘to take’, and *sjell*, ‘to bring’? Such a name perfectly fits to a trading place like Marseille, he said. All this has one historical explanation, he added: a large part of what is known as Greek was in fact borrowed by the Greeks from another population, the Pelasgians, who dwelled in most of the Mediterranean and of whom the Albanians are the direct descendants while the Greeks are newcomers in the region. This truth was discovered by a French historian, the veterinarian said, whose book, translated in Albanian, he had just been reading.

Interestingly, after talking about the border and its crossing, Mr. A had also mentioned the Pelasgians: his village of origin, he said, Zhulat, is renowned for its ‘Pelasgic walls’, remains of fortifications lying nearby. They date back from the ancient time when inhabitants of the area had ‘a pagan religion like the one of the Jews’ (*besimi pagan si i çifutëve*), before converting to Christianity and later to Islam. It is from that time that Greek and Albanian languages share 2000 words. In both cases the reference to an ancient past aims at producing a contrast with the present situation: in Pelasgic times, there were no Christians and Muslims, Greeks and Albanians spoke the same language and the latter were more ‘civilised’ than the former, while today one has to be Christian or Muslim, to speak Albanian or Greek, and Albanians are perceived by everyone, and especially by Greeks, as an uncivilised people.

These Pelasgic encounters in the south Albanian border context were not, I realised, accidental. It happened again a few years later, in November 2007, when I was told another story of a border crossing by Mr. B. We had just been introduced by a common acquaintance and Mr. B, a man in his sixties who worked in a regional administration and

who was also known as a poet, was pleased that I was interested in the Greek-Albanian border. He said that scholars like me should tell the truth about the border, otherwise the Greeks will keep claiming that southern Albania is 'Northern Epirus' and that it belongs to them. 'We don't like the Greeks here', he added, and started to tell the following story:

One day, I went to Greece, he said. On the bus, on our way back to Albania, between Athens and Ioannina, the driver kept complaining about the Albanians and insulting them. I could not stand it, but what could I do? I don't speak Greek. When we were approaching Arta, I asked someone to tell the driver to stop the bus. I got off, picked up a stone, kissed it three times and put it in my pocket. The driver was watching me and he asked why I was acting this way. I explained that before leaving Albania I had made a vow to kiss the Albanian soil on my return, and that is what I did. I wanted the driver to understand that for me Albania begins in Arta.

Once again, Mr. B's story illustrates the competing territorial claims that are made on both sides of the border. Although officially both states have abandoned their former claims on each other's territory, locally those claims are still taken seriously by some individuals and organisations. Actually, while Mr. B was telling his story, one of his colleagues sitting with us at the table took a map out of his briefcase and showed me the location of Arta with a knowing smile: the map was entitled *Ethnic Albania* and a thick red line representing the boundaries of this 'Ethnic Albania' was enclosing a large territory outside Albania's political borders, including Arta and the major part of north-western Greece. Such maps have spread around in the years 2000 and can be seen in various places, including on t-shirts sold in Gjirokastër's souvenirs shops. They popularise the idea, supported mainly by marginal right-wing nationalist political parties, that the recent developments in Kosovo – NATO bombing on Serbia in 1999, subsequent international administration of the former Yugoslav province and independence in February 2008 – open the way to a future unification of all Albanians in the Balkans, a view openly rejected by all mainstream political parties and governments of Albania.

The story told by Mr. B is also a condemnation of what is said to be a general attitude towards Albanians in Greece: Greeks complain about the Albanian migrants and insult them, not considering them as equals and as respectable people. This story illustrates the unequal relation between both sides of the border, as did Mr. A's story: for many Albanians, the experience of Europe is an experience of Greece and it is made of inequality. Economic inequality, as the Greek-Albanian border is a part of the global division of labour: cheap workforces are migrating from Albania to Greece, while agricultural products, manufactured goods and services cross the border from Greece to Albania. And political inequality: as a member state of EU and NATO, Greece enjoys a much better position in bilateral and international relations. This Albanian position of marginality and inferiority must be kept in mind in order to understand the way Albanians conceive of 'Europe' and of their relations with their neighbours.

Right after telling his story and watching at the map, Mr. B said that he was interested in the Pelasgians. He was writing a book on the Pelasgians and would like to

discuss things with me. ‘Herodotus, he said, wrote that the language spoken on Athens’ agora was Pelasgic, which the Greeks considered a barbaric language. Today, Pelasgic is still spoken in Athens: it is the Albanian language spoken by the migrants.’ Why do the Albanian migrants speak Pelasgic? ‘Pelasgians, he explained, were spread from Tibet to Scotland; the Etruscans, the founders of Rome, were also Pelasgians. The Albanians are their descendants.’ It is this vision of the past centred on the myth of the Pelasgic ancestors that I would like to question now, as it is always, like in these cases, related to a discourse on the border and what it divides.

### **Reinventing the Pelasgic Past**

In this section, I argue that the new uses of the border by Albanians and the re-appropriation of the borderland by local population in the 1990s came together with a reconstruction of ancient history which reflects both the state of relations between Greeks and Albanians and the way the latter envision their European future and identity. In other words, it seems that the production of a trans-border or transnational space in the present has a counterpart in the rewriting or reinvention of ancient history.

The official history inherited from the communist period states that modern Albanians descend from the Illyrians, an ancient population living in Western Balkans, north of the Greek world. A large part of the historians’ and anthropologists’ task was to demonstrate the continuity from Illyrians to modern Albanians and also to assert the specificity of Illyrians – as different from Greeks – and the existence of a clear boundary between the two populations (Cabanes 1988, Cabanes 2004). Such a conception of the past, which became dominant in the 1960s (Korkuti, Anamali and Gjinari 1969 Korkuti, Anamali & Gjinari 1969) strengthened the idea of an ancient and autochthonous Albanian nation and was legitimising the existence of the international border in the present. Special care was of course given to the border area with Greece, where many archaeological sites were discovered and identified as Illyrian settlements. The publication of the archaeological map of the country significantly started with the southern regions of Bregdet, Delvinë and the Drino Valley, in which Epirote tribes dwelled in Antiquity, but also where the Greek minority currently lives. While the ethnic affiliation of these tribes had long been under discussion (Cabanes 1988: 20-48), Albanian archaeologists clearly favoured the thesis of their Illyrian background.

It seems that Illyrians as official ancestors of modern Albanians are challenged nowadays by even more ancient and prestigious (although less known) ancestors, Pelasgians. Pelasgians are known by ancient Greek historians as the first inhabitants of Greece who were later replaced by Hellenes. In ancient Greek visions of the past, they appeared as the autochthonous population *par excellence*. For this reason, they were later considered as convenient ancestors by modern nations in search for priority and autochthony. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several attempts were made, mainly by German scholars whose work rapidly inspired Greek nationalist writers and historians, to link classical Greeks with Pelasgians in a genealogical conception of history.

German and Greek scholars were not the only ones to consider Pelasgians as valuable ancestors. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, another theory appeared, stating that Albanians were direct descendants of Pelasgians and were, as such, the most ancient and most autochthonous population living in Europe. It first appeared outside Albania, among foreign scholars and Italo-Albanian communities of southern Italy. All these attempts were inspired by the romantic conception of the nation which was common all over Europe at the time and had clearly a political motivation at a time when Ottoman rule was retreating from the Balkans, leaving space for territorial claims by new nation-states (Clayer 2007: 160-180, Malcolm 2002). As Noel Malcolm puts it, 'by identifying with Pelasgians, Albanians could claim that they were present in their Balkan homeland not only before the "barbarian" invaders of late Roman times (such as the Slavs), not only before the Romans themselves, but also, even more importantly, before the Greeks' (Malcolm 2002: 76-77). These theories were of particular importance in southern Albania, whose territory was disputed between Albanian and Greek nationalisms. In 1881 a part of the Ottoman province of Ioannina had been ceded to the Greek state, which had views on the city of Ioannina itself and on an extensive Christian inhabited area up to the Shkumbin River. On the Greek side, the Pelasgic theory was at first used to facilitate the incorporation of all Albanians (and other inhabitants of the Balkans) into the Greek national projects as common descendants of the Pelasgians; this theory was at first welcome by some Greek educated Albanian intellectuals (Sigalas 1999: 62-85). On the Albanian side, it supported the claim of priority and ownership of Albanians on the territories they inhabited.

These ideas however were later criticised by scholars from socialist Albania and the Pelasgians were forgotten or at least left aside official history: as a theory promoted for political reasons by 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, it served to establish the ancient and autochthonous character of Albanians in answer to Greek and Serbian claims on Albanian inhabited regions, but it was not at all scientifically grounded and for that reason could not be defended against contemporary theories on extra-European origin of the Albanians (Buda 1977: 27). Although Enver Hoxha himself supported the Pelasgic theory in his own writings (Cabanès 2004: 119), the directions he gave to Albanian archaeologists in the 1960s focused on the Illyrians and on the Illyrian-Albanian continuity. As a result, studies on the origin of Illyrians and Albanians published at that time do not even mention the Pelasgians.

The Pelasgians are nonetheless coming back today. Lots of publications by professional or amateur historians and linguists are revitalising the Pelasgic theory.<sup>1</sup> They are widely read and commented, not only among scholars and specialists. The re-using of the old theories is a complex phenomenon, linking in various ways Pelasgians, Illyrians, Etruscans, Greeks and Albanians, according to various motivations and using various kinds of evidence. In what follows, I try to resume the apparition of some of these ideas and their genealogy.



The translation of d'Angély's book in 1998 was probably a turning point in the rediscovery of Pelasgians in Albania. It was however preceded by less obtrusive signs of their rehabilitation. In the mid-1990s, Pelasgians appeared sporadically in the newspapers<sup>2</sup> and history schoolbooks published in 1994-1995 already mentioned Pelasgians as the most ancient population of the Balkans and Asia Minor. They were presented as an Indo-European population, whose language was not Greek and who preceded Illyrians in Albania. Schoolbooks however differ on what they assert on the relation between Pelasgians and Illyrians: the latter are sometimes said to be the heirs of the former, especially with regard to their language (Kuri, Zekolli & Jubani 1995: 32-33), but there is generally no assertion of direct continuity between Pelasgians and Illyrians. This recognition of the historical reality of Pelasgians by official schoolbooks can probably explain the popularity of recent literature concerning the Pelasgic origin of Albanians.

Recent publications on the Pelasgians, though often presented as innovative, generally rely on 19<sup>th</sup> century Pelasgic theories which they contribute to revitalise. Direct references to the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors are however rare, as if the negative image that was imposed on them in the socialist period was still devaluating their work. In this context, the relations between the old Pelasgic theories and the new ones rely mainly on the translation of books published in foreign languages at various time.

The renewed interest for Pelasgic theories in the late 1990s and in the 2000s was largely influenced by Robert d'Angély's book published in France at the beginning of the 1990s and partly translated in Albanian in 1998 (d'Angély 1990-1991; d'Angely 1998). Robert d'Angély (1893-1966) who visited Albania in his childhood and later married an Albanian woman from Përmet, decided to write a grammar of the Albanian language. His research on the history of Albanian and its link with other European languages was completed in 1961, but the book was published long after his death, by his daughter, in 1990-91. According to d'Angély, the Albanians are the descendants of the most ancient population of Europe, the Pelasgians. They are, however, not the only ones to descend from the Pelasgians; all Europeans are in a way descending from this primitive population which the author identifies with the 'white race' through an etymology of their name, which he interprets as meaning 'born white' (d'Angely 1998: 41-42). Albanians are nevertheless the most authentic heirs of the Pelasgians, as they have not been mixed with other populations, unlike Greeks, who have been in contact with Semitic peoples. Actually, according to d'Angély, there is no such thing as a Greek nation or even Greek people. Those who called themselves Hellenes in ancient times were a kind of Pelasgic elite who imposed a written and official form of the language on the rest of the population. A parallel is thus drawn between ancient and modern times, during which Greeks attempted to impose their language on illiterate Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire. The whole book is written in condemnation of the present situation, in which everything Greek is valued while everything Albanian is ignored or denigrated (d'Angely 1998: 23).

In 2002, another important book was translated from Greek: Aristides Kollias' *Arvanites and the Origin of Greeks*, first published in Athens in 1983 and reedited several times since then (Kollias 1983, Kolia 2002). In this book, which is considered as a cornerstone of

the rehabilitation of Arvanites in post-dictatorial Greece, the author presents the Albanian speaking population of Greece, known as Arvanites, as the most authentic Greeks because their language is closer to ancient Pelasgic, who were the first inhabitants of Greece. According to him, ancient Greek was formed on the basis of Pelasgic, so that many Greek words have an Albanian etymology. In the Greek context, the book initiated a 'counterdiscourse' (Gefou-Madianou 1999: 422) aiming at giving Arvanitic communities of southern Greece a positive role in Greek history. This was achieved by using 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas on Pelasgians and by melting together Greeks and Albanians in one historical genealogy (Baltsiotis & Embirikos 2007: 430-431, 445). In the Albanian context of the 1990s and 2000s, the book is read as proving the anteriority of Albanians not only in Albania but also in Greece; it serves mainly the rehabilitation of Albanians as an antique and autochthonous population in the Balkans. These ideas legitimise the presence of Albanians in Greece and give them a decisive role in the development of ancient Greek civilisation and later on the creation of the modern Greek state, in contrast to the general negative image of Albanians in contemporary Greek society. They also reverse the unequal relation between the migrants and the host country, making the former the heirs of an autochthonous and civilised population from whom the latter owes everything that makes their superiority in the present day.

The Albanian translation of Edwin Jacques' *The Albanians. An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, a few years later, also played a role in popularising Pelasgic theories (Jacques 1995, Jacques 2005). Unlike the others, Jacques, who worked as a missionary and a teacher in Korçë from 1932 to 1940, does not propose a 'new' theory on the origin of Albanians. By dedicating a whole chapter to 19<sup>th</sup> century Pelasgic theories without dismissing them, he nevertheless offers a scholarly and foreign caution to those who currently support these ideas.

More recently, Mathieu Aref's book on *Albania, or the Incredible Odyssey of a Pre-Hellenic People* was also translated and widely commented (Aref 2003, Aref 2007). Mathieu Aref was born (1938) in Egypt from Albanian parents who had emigrated from Northern Albania. He was educated in French and his family eventually left Egypt for France after the 1952 coup. His book on Albanians, completed by another one on pre-Hellenic Greece (Aref 2004), is an attempt to establish Albanians as heirs of the Pelasgians, the first European people known in history. Using linguistic evidence – among others – he is led to a critic of the Indo-European model which, according to him, did not take sufficient account of Albanian, the only living testimony of Pelasgic (Aref 2003: 21, 119).

This presentation of some of the main titles supporting the Pelasgic origin of Albanians gives an idea of their flourishing and vitality in present-day Albania. Most of them, as already mentioned, come from abroad and are known in Albania through translations. It should be noted that the Illyrian thesis is still supported by Albanian scholars as the only scientifically grounded theory. Indeed, the Pelasgic 'theories' do not resist any critical assessment based on historical, archaeological or linguistic evidence and they are strongly criticised by many professional historians and linguists (Demiraj 2008), for whom the main issue is still the documentation of Illyrian-Albanian continuity. They are

however very popular. What is at stake is not scientific knowledge: one of the implications of the Pelasgic theories is to link, from the very beginning, Albanians and Greeks. They formulate an alternative myth of origin, which can be seen as a response to the exclusion felt by Albanians in Greece.

### **Re-appropriation of the Border**

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the content of some of the publications presented above, several concluding remarks can be made on the phenomenon itself, based on the literature review and on its local reception in southern Albania: why are Pelasgians reappearing in present-day Albania? Indeed, the renewed interest for the Pelasgians is not limited to the southern borderlands of Albania. The Pelasgic issue is however easily connected to issues of border crossings and border relations between Albania and Greece, as shown by examples presented in the first section. The border context can probably help us to understand a phenomenon which, although not exclusively concerned with international borders, is given a particular emphasis due to the existence of the border and its practice by people leaving nearby.

The Pelasgic theories are clearly playing the role of a counter-discourse: they oppose mainstream and well established views, in Albania and abroad, on the origin of Albanians and on the relationships of their ancestors with ancient Greeks. The political and nationalistic motivations of these new theories are clearly expressed in Mexhit Kokalari's *Epirus, Epicentre of Ancient Civilisation in Europe*. The book opens with a strong critic of the collective volume *History of Albania* edited by the Academy of sciences of Albania (Kokalari 2001: 5-9). According to Kokalari (born in 1924 in Gjirokastër), historical research on the origin of Albanians should serve the defence of the nation against its enemies, namely Serbs and Greeks. The latter are especially dangerous as their claims on southern Albania are legitimised by Albanian historians who accept the common view of the anteriority and superiority of Greek civilisation all over the Balkans. By doing so, those historians allow Greeks to assert that everything civilised in ancient Albania originated from Greece. On the contrary, Kokalari argues, most of what is known as ancient Greek civilisation, inclusive the Olympic Games, was borrowed from the Pelasgians. That is why 'we have to evidence the unquestionable origin of Albanians from Pelasgians of Dodona as well as our pre-Hellenic origin' (Kokalari 2001: 9). Unsurprisingly in this non scientific context, the words 'taboo', 'plot', 'truth' and 'discover' are frequently used by supporters of Pelasgic theories who present themselves as working for the recognition of true facts about Albanians, against the deeds of Greeks and their allies in Albania (see for instance d'Angely 1998: 23; Margilaj 2000: 10; Pilika 2005: 420). In this aspect, the return of the Pelasgians is a reaction against communist propaganda which, to quote Fatos Lubonja, acted to 'froze many truths' by turning 'mythology into science and science into mythology' (Lubonja 2002: 96).

In the border area, the revival of Pelasgic theories is not only a reaction to socialist-era propaganda. It is also directed against the other side of the border, in such a way that the border context itself can probably be said to favour conspiracy theories, as in the

following case. In December 2001, in Gjirokastër, I met Mr. C, a civil officer at the Ministry of Education who worked in Tirana but frequently visited his hometown of Gjirokastër. Actually, he explained, his family came from the other side of the border, from a village close to Ioannina. The village was destroyed by the local chief of Ottoman Epirus at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and some families took refuge in Gjirokastër. Hearing about my interest in the border, Mr. C warned me: 'I'll tell you a secret', he said, and went on as follows:

A long time ago, inhabitants of this area spoke a language called Pelasgic. Most of them have lost it, but Albanians are the ones whose language is closest to Pelasgic, because the country has always been backward and there were less population movements than elsewhere. For instance, the name of Helen of Troy means 'the one who was "abandoned" (*e lëna*) by her husband' and the name of Troy itself is Albanian, it means 'territory, lot' (*trojë*). The names of many Greek gods make sense in Albanian and only in Albanian: Aphrodite is 'the one who is "close to the day"' (*afër ditës*). Some people would even like to explain the name 'Athens' by 'our father' (*i ati inë*), as it is pronounced here in Gjirokastër, but this would be to go too far and to make unverifiable statements.

Why is it a secret? I asked Mr. C: 'Because during Enver Hoxha's rule, it was forbidden to talk about those things, it could provoke a war with Greece. And even today, due to the hundreds of thousands Albanian migrants in Greece, the government does not want to raise a conflict with Greece. Here, in the Balkans, everything is political, including the most ancient history.' Such accusations of 'silencing the truth' are also made against the Greek government who supposedly restrains excavations on the archaeological site of Dodona, in Epirus, because researches would undoubtedly reveal the Pelasgic – i.e. Albanian – origin of the famous Pan-Hellenic sanctuary (Kokalari 2001: 17; Pilika 2005: 163).

The success of Pelasgic theories in the border area is also a reaction to local practices of the border. Conditions of border crossings are a source of resentment against the Greeks, who are accused of humiliating Albanians, of making money on them through the politics of visa issuing or legalisation, of favouring Christians over Muslims and thus imposing name changes or religious conversion on the latter. The reception of Albanian migrants in Greek society is felt as extremely humiliating and frustrating, due to the negative stereotypes attached to Albanians in Greece, which make them the 'pre-eminent representative of criminal behaviour', the 'embodiment of poverty and backwardness' and the 'traditional enemy of Greekness' (Kapllani & Mai 2005: 164-165). Such stereotypes are especially rejected by southern Albanians from the borderland, who, within the context of the Albanian nation, perceive themselves as more civilised and developed than northerners. In this context, another factor of revitalisation of Pelasgic theories is the fear that Greek claims on Northern Epirus might still be an actual threat on Albanian territory and, beyond, on Albanian identity. The exacerbation of feelings of inferiority and threat seems to make the border area an ideal breeding ground for the Pelasgic myth of origin.

These Pelasgic theories allow southern Albanians to assert at the same time their identity and their related superiority over Greeks. They are however ambiguous, as they already were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They can be used to assert the complete otherness of Greeks, but also to underline the common origin of both Albanians and Greeks as descendants of Pelasgians. On this ground, Pelasgic ancestry justifies the recognition of a transnational – or ‘multiethnic’ as Mr. A would say – space between Greece and Albania. One day of December 2001, on a bus going from Gjirokaštër to their village, old people whose children were migrants in Greece were discussing of the fact that, after all, ‘Albanians and Greeks belong to the same race’: life in Greece would not be difficult for Albanians, if only Greeks accepted that proximity. But they added, turning identity to superiority: ‘If Greeks were not stealing public money, Greece would be much more developed. But Greece is nothing, compared to Albania’. There is altogether a striking symmetry between the production of transnationalism between Greece and Albania – of which the Albanian migrant is the most visible figure – on the one hand, and the reinvention of the Pelasgians as ‘transnational ancestors’ of both Albanians and Greeks, at least from the Albanian point of view.

Moreover, the advantages of the Pelasgic theories go beyond the recognition of common ancestry linking modern Albanians to modern Greeks and beyond the reversion of inequality in their contemporary relations. They state that the Pelasgians were spread all over Europe and the Mediterranean: according to those authors, all ancient civilisations in Europe (Greek, Roman, Etruscan, Celtic, etc.) stemmed from the Pelasgic civilisation. They were the first Europeans; their direct descendants, the Albanians, are thus the most ancient and most authentically European people (Kokalari 2001: 14; Aref 2003: 22). And this, they say, should be considered by the European Union: there is no reason to exclude Albanians from Europe; on the contrary, they *are* Europe. In this respect, the Pelasgic issue is also a discourse on Europe and on the place and role of Albanians within Europe. This is what appears in the following song, which I recorded in September 2008 in the village of Zhulat. Its inhabitants are Muslim and many of them have worked in Greece. They frequently complain, as in other Muslim villages, of the fact that, unlike Christians, Muslims are not welcome in Greece. The song is about Albanian history and its heroes; like other polyphonic songs that have been created after 1991 and which singers themselves classify as ‘noble songs’ (*kengë fisnike*),<sup>3</sup> it is addressed to Europe and starts like this:

<i>Evropë vëri gishtin kokës</i>	Europe, be aware!
<i>S’jemi ne ata kaçakë</i>	We are not outlaws
<i>Jemi ilirët fisnikë</i>	We are the noble Illyrians
<i>Gjaku ynë rrjedh nga pellazgët</i>	Pelasgic blood flows into our veins

\* \* \*

To conclude I would like to suggest that the vitality of the Pelasgic myth of origin is a direct consequence of what is going on at the border and of the new state of relations between Greece and Albania and between Albania and Europe. We are witnessing a re-appropriation of the border, once a forbidden zone, by local people through practices and

representations of space and history. The re-arranging of ethnic and national boundaries between Greeks and Albanians through the myth of Pelasgic origin can be seen as an answer, on the imaginary level, to the difficult crossing of the actual international border through the narrow gate of legal migration and to the economic and cultural penetration of Greece in Albania. This response to exclusion is itself both inclusive and exclusive: the Pelasgians are the ancestors of all Europeans, but only Albanians are their direct and authentic descendants and, as such, can claim for a kind of absolute autochthony in Europe. By claiming Pelasgic ancestry, supporters of these ideas are transforming marginality – Albanians are on the margins of Europe – into centrality and superiority – they are more European than anyone else.

Not everyone in Albania believes in the Pelasgic myth of origin, but these ideas are more and more popular in an area where Europe is at the same time very close and still too far away and inaccessible. The return of the Pelasgians might be an illustration of a well-known paradox in the anthropology of globalisation: faced with the difficulties induced by modernity, local people participate in the symbolic reconstruction of community through imagination and reversion to tradition and ancient past (Abélès 2008: 205). We are thus reminded that representations reflect the reality of social relations and that imagination plays a part in the reproduction of society through the use of symbols (Godelier 2007). Through the Pelasgic issue, we can see how an academic debate makes use of symbols and articulate with the geopolitical and economic relations between Europe and its margins, between Europe and its immediate neighbours.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Among others: d'Angely 1998; Margilaj 2000; Kokalari 2001; Pilika 2005; Spahiu 2006; Kocaqi 2007; Kocaqi 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Xhelaj 1996 who argued that only through the study of Albanian language decisive results could be obtained in the solution of the 'Pelasgic issue'.

<sup>3</sup> Eckehard Pistrick, personal communication, November 2008.

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