



# Looking for Europe on the Borders of Albania

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## LOOKING FOR EUROPE ON THE BORDERS OF ALBANIA

*Gilles de Rapper*

My paper is an attempt to understand the impact of changes in the borderland between Greece and Albania after 1991 on the way its inhabitants envision “Europe”. More precisely, I would like to relate the recent success of some “ideas” about the ancient past of the area with the state of social relations between Albanians and Greeks as experienced by local inhabitants of the borderland.

In the first part of the paper, I will use the story of a border crossing as a starting point. This story reveals some of the features of the border and how it works. The borderland appears as a place where economic inequality and political domination are experienced in everyday life. From this starting point I will then address one of the issues suggested in this session, concerning Europe as a metaphor and local knowledge, through the example of what can be called the ‘return of the Pelasgians’ as ancestors of modern Albanians. The argument is that the vitality of the Pelasgic theory since the mid ‘90s is closely connected to the new situation created across the border and to the marginality and exclusion from Europe experienced by local social actors. This 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. My paper is thus an attempt to assess the role of social relations in “imagination” and the production of “ideas” (Godelier 1984).

The story was told me by a man from Gjirokastër in November 2007; let's call him Muzo. We had just been introduced by a common acquaintance and Muzo, a man in his sixties who worked in a regional administration and 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.

Why is this story interesting? First of all it 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 Muzo 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, 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.

But there's more. The story told by Muzo 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 thus illustrates the unequal relation between both sides of the border: for many Albanians, and especially for southern 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 workforce is exported 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 position of marginality and inferiority must be kept in mind in order to understand the way Albanians conceive of "Europe".

Right after telling his story and watching at the map, Muzo said that he was interested in the Pelasgians. He is 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 this case, related to a discourse on the contemporary relationships of Albanians with Greece and Europe.

I would like to argue that the new uses of the border by Albanians and the re-appropriation of the borderland by local population in the ‘90s 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, I would like to suggest 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 – different from the Greeks – and the existence of a clear boundary between the two populations (Cabanes 1987; 2004). Such a conception of the past, which became dominant in the ‘60s (Korkuti, Anamali, *et al.* 1969) was legitimising the existence of the international border in the present.

It seems that the Illyrians as official ancestors of modern Albanians are challenged nowadays by more ancient and prestigious (although less known) ancestors, the Pelasgians. The Pelasgians are known by ancient Greek historians as the first inhabitants of Greece who were later replaced by Hellenes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a theory appeared, stating that Albanians were descending from the Pelasgians and were, as such, the most ancient and most autochthonous population living in Europe. It first appeared outside Albania, among Austrian scholars and Italo-Albanian communities of southern Italy and was inspired by the romantic conception of the nation which was common all over Europe at the time (Clayer 2007). A later variation of these theories stated that both Albanians and Greeks (together with other populations in the Balkans and Asia Minor) were descendants of the Pelasgians (Sigalas 2001).

These ideas however were later criticised by scholars from socialist Albania and the Pelasgians were forgotten or at least left aside official history. In 1976, the historian Aleks Buda wrote about the Pelasgic origin of the Albanian as a theory promoted for political reasons by 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals. The theory served, he says, to establish the ancient and autochthonous character of the Albanians in answer to Greek and Serbian claims on Albanian inhabited regions. He however denies the scientific value of such theories; they initiated research interest for Albanian popular culture, by looking for traces of ancient past in the lives of ordinary people, but they were 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). It is true that archaeological and linguistic evidence related

to the Pelasgians are very meagre compared to what is known of the Illyrians, which is already quite fragmentary, specially regarding Illyrian-Albanian continuity (Wilkes 1992). Although Enver Hoxha himself supported the Pelasgic theory in his own writings, the directions he gave to Albanian archaeologists in the '60s focused on the Illyrians and on the Illyrian-Albanian continuity (Cabanès 2004: 119). As a result, studies on the origin of Illyrians and Albanians published at that time do not even mention the Pelasgians (see for instance Anamali, Korkuti 1969).

The Pelasgians are nonetheless coming back today. Lots of publications by amateur historians are revitalising the Pelasgic theory. Books popularising these ideas are widely read and commented, not only among scholars and specialists. It is interesting to note that some of these books rely on works published outside Albania, such as Robert d'Angely's books published in France at the beginning of the '90s and partly translated in Albanian in 1998 (d'Angely 1998), or Mathieu Aref's books (Aref 2003), translated in 2007).<sup>1</sup> Pre-war studies on the Pelasgic origin of the Albanians are also known through a small number of studies conducted during socialist Albania which are rediscovered today. Such is for instance Spiro Konda's book on "The Albanians and the Pelasgic issue", published in 1962, at a time when these theories were already not in favour (Konda 1962). It is said that the book was eventually published, but without the imprimatur of the Academy of sciences (Bitraku 2008). Another study was written during these years (between 1948 and 1983) but published only recently, in 2005, under the suggestive title of "The Pelasgians, our denied origin" (Pilika 2005). Finally, these ideas are also making their way into academic work. Arsim Spahiu's book on "Pelasgians and Illyrians in Ancient Greece" is thus the publication of his doctoral thesis defended in France in 2005 (Spahiu 2006). As can be seen, the return of the Pelasgians in itself is the result of a renewed circulation of ideas between Albania and the rest of Europe. The part played by Albanian communities outside Albania, in Europe and elsewhere in the world, through discussions on the internet, is also to be noticed.

In these theories, modern Albanians are direct descendants, through the Illyrians, of the ancient Pelasgians, considered as the founders of the most ancient civilisation in Europe. The Albanian language is presented as the only living testimony of the Pelasgic language. This is the core of contemporary Pelasgic theories; these theories do not however form a unified body of ideas and may vary from one author to the other. Depending on the authors, Greeks are sometimes also the descendants of the Pelasgians, although in a less direct way. Most of the times however, Greeks are said to come from a different stock and Greek civilisation to be the result of 'oriental' influences (especially Egyptian) on the Pelasgic background which is more 'European'.

Needless to say, these "theories" do not resist any critical assessment based on historical, archaeological or linguistic evidence. They are strongly criticised in Albania by many professional historians, for whom the main issue is still the documentation of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert d'Angely (1893-1966) visited Albania in his childhood and later married an Albanian woman from Përmet. Mathieu Aref was born (1938) in Egypt from Albanian parents who had emigrated from Northern Albania.

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. It is in a way a response to the exclusion felt by Albanians in Greece. It is interesting to note that the revitalisation of the Pelasgians relies on works written by Arvanite amateur historians, such as the book of Aristide Kollias on “Arvanites and the origin of Greeks”, whose attempts were to evidence that the Albanian presence in Greece goes back as far as prehistory (Kolia 2002, first published in Greek in 1983). 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 with the general negative image of Albanians in contemporary Greek society. They 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 advantages of the Pelasgic theories go beyond the recognition of common ancestry linking modern Albanians to modern Greeks and beyond the reversion of inequality. 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 (Kokaları 2001: 14; Aref 2003: 22). And this, they say, should be considered by the EU: 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.

Here is an example. The following song was recorded last September in the village of Zhulat, half an hour from Gjirokastër, a village also known for its “Pelasgic walls”, remains of fortifications lying nearby. The inhabitants of Zhulat are Muslim; 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; it is addressed to Europe and starts like this:

<i>Europë 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 pellaçgët</i>	Pelasgic blood flows into our veins

This song is one of many polyphonic songs that have been created after 1991 and which singers themselves classify as “noble songs” (*kenge fisnike*). Its model might be the song “Open your doors, Europe” which dates back from the 90s, and which was already addressed to Europe <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Eckehard Pistrick, personal communication, November 2008.

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 on 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. It is a response to exclusion, which 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. 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 intellectual 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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