

Book review for South Slav Journal

ALBANIA AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL GUIDE Oliver Gilkes, I.B.Tauris, London, 2012

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A BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF ALBANIAN HISTORY Robert Elsie, I.B.Tauris, London, 2013

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These two reference works are both, in their way, indicators of the revival of an academic historical tradition in writing about contemporary Albania. Robert Elsie is well known as a Canadian scholar with a long record of many publications, particularly in the literature field, and Oliver Gilkes has been for many years a part of the team from the University of East Anglia in Britain engaged in the excavations at the archaeological site of Butrint, on the Albanian coast near the border with Greece.

The Biographical Dictionary that Elsie has compiled is a substantial and welcome work focussed on the plethora of foreign and native authorities in particular fields. It is strongest on the diplomatic and literary figures from the earlier period, before Albanian independence, on literature and associated disciplines. It is a scholarly and authoritative work in these areas, but it does not always meet quite the same standards of absolute clarity and authority everywhere. The entries on figures such as Kim Philby repeat as canonical information views from the Cold War period which have been qualified or even discredited by recent research and archival publication, and much more space is given to anti-communists and oppositional figures in the Diaspora, even if they had little real influence on events, than the main movers and shakers in Hoxha's and Alia's Albania. The Sunni Muslim and Bektashi element in Albanian religious life is not as well represented as prominent Catholic figures, although the biographical information on those included is always of a high quality. A few figures from modern Kosovo, like Ibrahim Rugova and Jusuf

Gervalle, make the book, but many others do not. It will nevertheless be a very valuable and reliable reference work, particularly for non-specialists.

Oliver Gilkes is a well known British archaeologist who worked at Butrint for a long period and he has compiled a welcome and very ambitious volume on the main sites a tourist is likely to want to visit, particularly in the south of the country. It is a bulky and expensive book, though, and given the paucity of tourists in Albania, apart from day trips to Butrint from Corfu, it is likely it will be more used in libraries by scholars than tourists in the field. As such, it may well be judged in a different way than that the author seems to have intended.

The view of the main southern sites is very up to date and include many exciting recent discoveries, and it has excellent site maps and charts and photographs. But there is a slight sense of a volume that has fallen between two stools – for the scholar, there are many major and minor sites, particularly from the Christian medieval period, and important later Ottoman period mosque ruins and secular structures in urban centres that are omitted that will limit its use as a reference work, and there is a surprising amount of speculative writing for a scholarly work outside the main field of expertise of the author on modern Albanian history and politics which is of very variable quality. It is very much a classical archaeologists view of Albania, and one dominated by writing about monuments in the Orthodox (predominantly) South, something that particularly affects the choice of Christian monuments included and described so that many very important Roman Catholic church monuments (e.g. Rubik), and major sites with Illyrian/classical origins and later Catholic-origin monuments outside the south (Lissus/Lezhe and Drisht/Drivastium) are completely omitted.

It is surprising that the book has no Bibliography, and there are some strange statements in the writing outside the archaeological orbit, so that the distinguished British ancient historian and authority on ancient Macedonia the late Nicholas Hammond is described as a 'topographer'. There is no mention of the various Albanian archaeological guides with scholarly-standards that exist, dating back to the Zogist period. The map of Albania and its neighbours has various oddities and errors, so that, for instance, Gostivar in FYROM/Republic of Macedonia is shown as at the end of a road that actually leads to Tetovo, a much larger town which does have classical and Byzantine origins, which Gostivar does not.

In the descriptions of Shkodra one of the very few northern sites included in the book, there are lacunae, such as the statement that the Castle of Rozafa is 'located some kilometres to the south of the modern city centre', when it actually stands well within it on its southern boundary above the river Drin. What is described as Shkodra's 'now largely abandoned communist industrial zone' is actually now occupied by several thriving mostly Italian owned food factories. This book is an important scholarly contribution to archaeological knowledge of southern Albania, particularly the Butrint region and classical sites fairly close to it like Byllis, but offers some hostages to fortune elsewhere and in

essence has a misleading title. It sometimes shows an insensitive view of ordinary Albanian life and culture, so that, for instance, the Gjirokastra folklore festival which has always been popular, unpolitical and widely supported in Albania is attacked as part of the 'Hoxha myth.' An accurate title would be 'Southern Albania An Archaeological Guide' or something of that kind. It is a valuable reference work but one that could have been substantially improved by better editing, and where scholarly debts were set out through a Bibliographical and footnote framework.

James Pettifer