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***THE CHALLENGE TO PRESERVE THE CHAM HERITAGE***

*(2005)*

One of the most striking impressions of contemporary Epirus is the emptiness of the interior of this northern Greek province, which is known to Albanians as Chameria. Vast forests now cover what was once prime grazing land leaving just scattered settlements marooned as a result of a cruel history that has driven Albanians, Slavs and Greeks from this region because of their ethnicity or political beliefs. The ever-encroaching wilderness has enveloped many villages once occupied by ethnic Albanians or Chams, who were forced to flee their homes towards the end of the Second World War. There are, however, some haunting reminders of this once populous region in the form of ruined houses, mosques and other buildings, which protrude from the hillsides or in isolated pockets hidden in undergrowth on the outskirts of new settlements.

These older buildings of Epirus/Chameria comprise one of the most important geographically concentrated clusters of historic monuments from the Venetian and Ottoman periods in south eastern Europe. They exist in a compact region stretching inland from the 1913 Greek - Albanian border south to Ioannina and Arta, and down to Vonitsa and Preveza on the coast. Apart from the theatre at Dodona, there are few monuments from the ancient period. The few outstanding remains are focused on the Illyrian hilltop forts, which later became the foundations of the great Venetian and Ottoman citadels such as Rogoi and Karavosstari Castle.

There are also numerous important Islamic monuments to be found throughout Epirus, which include the hauntingly beautiful mosque in the lake at Ioannina, the Ottoman military edifices at Pende Pigada, and many graceful bridges at Arta and elsewhere. Thousands of mostly uninhabited ordinary houses have somehow managed to survive the violent and tragic history of the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The disgraceful state of preservation of much of this heritage by the Greek government should be a matter of international concern. Although there has been some progress in declaring conservation areas in Greek cities in recent years, many historic buildings once occupied by Albanians have been demolished since 1945. In the countryside, some restoration work has begun at a very basic level in buildings such as Rogoi Castle, but the greater share of available resources goes to sites like Dodona which can find a place in the approved 'canon' of Greek history. However, alongside this work there are many gross distortions of both ancient and modern history in the information provided for visitors. The Illyrian period is never mentioned, and the nature and ethnic background of rulers such as King Pyrrus is either omitted or grossly distorted. The fact that local tribes during the ancient period were a mixture of Greek and non-Greek speakers is omitted.

In the modern period, the nature of such distortions becomes much worse. This is especially the case during the period of rule by Ali Pasha of Tepelena (1788-1823)

Many Ottoman monuments have no historical or cultural information available at all to visitors. The very few surviving mosques have been taken over as 'museums', following the model pioneered by the Yugoslav communists, despite the existence of observant Muslims in many localities. Muslim cemeteries are frequently desecrated by modern building works, particularly road building. At the same time, most restoration work is financed by the European Union, which is unaware that EU funding is being used to underwrite the ideological projection of Greek nationalist history.

The most acute crisis for the Cham architectural heritage concerns domestic properties. This is naturally inextricably linked with the failure of the Greek government to deal properly with the *original* Albanian Cham owners. Practices differ in each locality. In some cases historic houses belonging to absent Cham families are respected monuments in their locality, and are not interfered with, even if they are in a poor state of repair. Others however, are often used illegally for inappropriate purposes, such as shelter for farm animals. Elsewhere such houses have been seized by illegal Greek owners or squatted in by internal migrants in Greece. In other places there are important collections of old Albanian tower houses, or Kullas, of outstanding architectural quality that have survived amongst the forests and scrub land by virtue of being in old military zones near the Albanian border.

The most important urban monuments are at Paramithia and Margariti, and in small towns like Perdika. Paramithia has a large Cham tower kulla that is wrongly ascribed by the Greek local authority as 'Venetian', and a magnificently situated Ottoman fortress which it is made very difficult to access. Margariti has numerous very important large domestic houses, including the old residence of the Ottoman pasha. The latter is completely overgrown by vegetation, and is impossible for visitor access. In some locations, Cham houses have been illegally taken over by local Greek interlopers, including the Greek Orthodox Church which can result in either the demolition or inappropriate restoration of the Cham property.

Thus the preservation of the wider social and historic heritage of Cameria interfaces with the political and legal problem of justice for the Cham property owners and compensation claims by families affected by the Zervas genocide in 1943-44 and earlier ethnic cleansing attempts. The strategy in Epirus of successive Greek governments has been to allow a slow and largely hidden process of erosion of Cham history and heritage and its substitution by Greek 'modernity'. A similar process also affects thousands of properties in Northern Greece owned by Slav-Macedonians, who were forced to leave Greece after supporting the losing side in the Greek Civil war 1944-1949. In these cases, Greece is

in breach of European Union and international law applicable to the payment of compensation and property restitution for the victims of war and ethnic cleansing. The main reason for the continuation of the 'state of war' by the Greek Parliament and the illegal restrictions on the Turkish and Slav-Macedonian minorities is to prevent a rational resolution of these issues and protect Greece from financial compensation claims.

It is not only Greece that should be chastised for the neglect of Cham architectural heritage. The Albanian government has also shown considerable disregard for matters relating to Cham property issues in Greece. It was only after the publication of a British document on the status of Cham property in Greece in April 2002 that the Albanian parliament began to address the Cham issue.<sup>1</sup> Despite the draft resolution on compensation and restitution of Cham property approved by the parliamentary group of the ruling Socialist Party in March 2004, there has been no further progress in the matter.

If the Tirana government continues to delay resolving this issue, it will be responsible for further condemning the Cham cultural and historical heritage and tradition in Epirus to oblivion. Some critics of the Socialist government in Tirana would also claim that this neglect has been paralleled by the indifference shown by that government to the preservation of historic Ottoman areas such as Korca Market in Albania itself. It is in the general interests of all Albanians and anyone concerned with the preservation of south east Europe's architectural heritage, to halt this process of architectural erosion. The neglect of the Cham cultural heritage by both the Greek and Albanian governments, shows complete disregard and indifference to international and EU law and natural justice. Greece as a European Union member is legally bound to respect minority rights and minority cultural rights.

In regard to the heritage of the Chams and other minorities in Greece, there appears to be little or no respect for minority cultures, combined with a subtle and active government policy directed towards their complete erosion or assimilation. Many EU laws have never been properly incorporated into national legislation in Athens, and it is a scandal that Greece continues to receive funding for heritage projects that in

many instances in North Western Greece actively promote the destruction of a central element in that heritage.

It is time the issue of the Cham heritage in Greece was properly internationalised. A possible avenue for those seeking to preserve this heritage is to seek the involvement of international bodies such as UNESCO and Monuments in Danger or the British organisation SAVE Europe's Heritage, to force Greece to recognise the problem and take appropriate steps to remedy it. The decay of these buildings is accelerating at an alarming pace and unless measures are taken soon Europe will have lost a fascinating glimpse into its Ottoman past. Cultural heritage is also important in international relations. For example, the destruction of Buddhist statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 was a quite significant factor in mobilising international opinion against the Taliban regime, and helping legitimise humanitarian military action in that country. In the same way, in northern Cyprus attacks on Orthodox churches, the theft of icons and associated vandalism has been valuable in illustrating and focusing international attention the human rights issues there.

The cultural policies and minority rights orientation of modern Greece are quite incompatible with European Union membership and international law, and the government and civil society organisations in Albania should have no hesitation in a vigorous pursuit of Cham rights in this respect, as in others. If Greece does not change its current policies, the EU has various responses to penalise Greece, such as those applied over the environmental crisis on the turtle nesting beaches on the Ionian island of Zachinthos. EU funding was withheld here until there was compliance with EU law on wild life preservation.

The promotion of the restoration of the Cham buildings is also part of the wider issue of the opening up of Ottoman heritage as a normal part of modern Greek - and European - history. It also encompasses the wider question of improving the human rights and legal status of all ethnic Albanians living in Greece. The cultural achievement of the 500 years of Turkish rule is never subject to rational evaluation in modern Greece. An

author writing in the authoritative reference volume 'Blue Guide Greece' recently stated that there was "no Ottoman archaeology in Greece".<sup>2</sup>

In order to assist moves to restore the most important architectural sites, a number of clear steps need to be taken. A comprehensive inventory of Cham monuments should be drawn up, so that it is clear to the international cultural community what buildings need to be preserved. A central cadastral register of house ownership before the 1944 massacres is urgently needed. A comprehensive map of Chameria needs to be produced, showing Cham place names and modern Greek place names. The Albanian language in Greece has been marginalised and needs proper recognition as a minority language, along the lines of the use of the Turkish language in Thrace. The Greek displacement of the Cham physical heritage has been possible because it has been delegitimised in international cultural discourse, and a canonic version of Greek nationalist history of the heritage substituted.

Above all, the Albanian government and associated cultural organisations and universities in Albanian communities throughout the Balkans and the diaspora, need to clearly understand that the Cham heritage is not a sectional cause. The legacy of Cham occupation in north western Greece should be recognised as central to gaining international recognition of Albanian culture as is the struggle for the independence of Kosova, and the improvement of human rights for Albanians throughout the world.