

The Cultural Heritage of the Great Prespa Region

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Abstract

The Great Prespa region is situated in the Balkan Peninsula and is divided between Albania, Macedonia and Greece. It includes the Great Prespa Lake and the surrounding beach and meadow, areas designated for agricultural use and the towns of Pusteci (formerly known as Liqenas) and Resen. This region is now part of the Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve 'Ohrid-Prespa Watershed. Great and Small Prespa lakes plus Ohrid Lake are included in this newly-approved UNESCO world Heritage Site, but for this paper, we are looking only at the area surrounding the Great Prespa Lake. It is critical for this area to be protected immediately, because of the overuse it has undergone in recent years.

While current levels of fauna are dangerously declining due to recent over-harvesting, this area has been known historically for its diverse natural and cultural features. Thus it is important to take drastic measures to reclaim the natural beauty immediately, including those areas currently covered by Prespa National Parks in Albania and Greece and Galichica and Pelisteri National Parks in Macedonia.

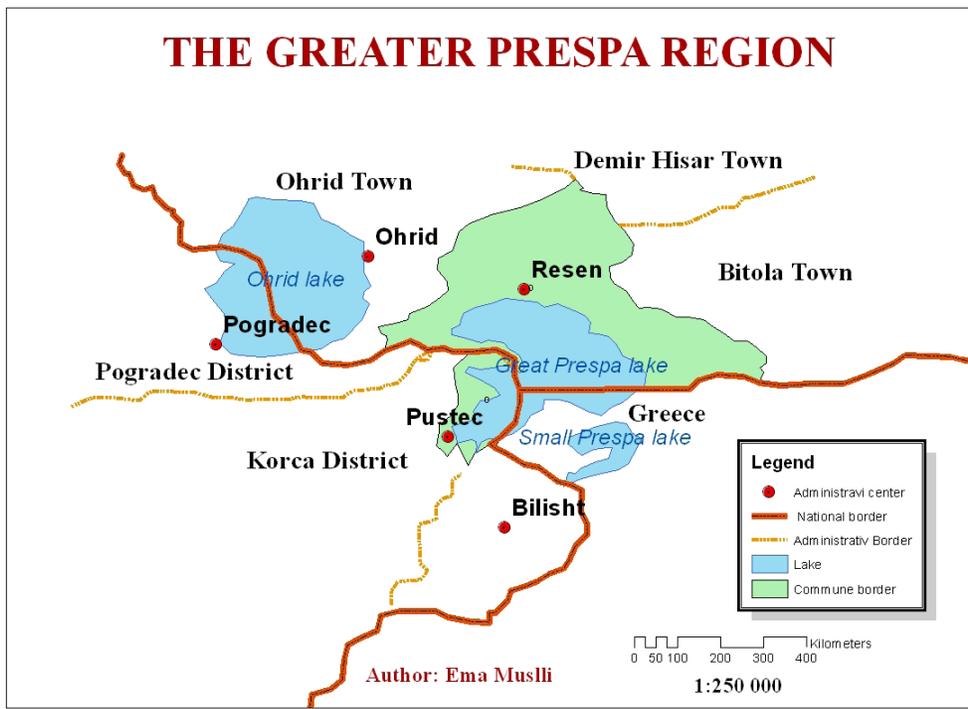
Due to many wars over the centuries, it exists a mixture of Albanian and Macedonian culture. The historical and architectural remaining, religious structures and artifacts testify the richness and uniqueness of the communities of Pustec and Resen have. The cultural heritage is now a key element designated for the development of the region's sustainable tourism development. This study was enhanced via the Geographic Info System (GIS) digital presentation showing the opportunities for natural and cultural tourism in both countries (Albania and Macedonia).

Keywords: *tourist potential, cultural heritage, Great Prespa Lake, Albania, Macedonia.*

Introduction

Pustec (formerly known as Liqenas), and Resen date back to the Neolithic period when early settlers chose their location close to fresh water and abundant hunting grounds. These small communities have a long history, with many of the earlier structures standing today, and welcoming visitors. From 1945-1990, the community of Pustec, was completely isolated from both Albania and Macedonia. In those years, their most significant economic activity was the raising of livestock, mostly the raise of goats, cattle and agriculture, mostly fruits like apples and grape. Tourism is not the primary economic activity in the region. Today, on both sides of the Lake, there is an opportunity to explore and develop a solid tourism industry in this region.

Map.1. Geographic position of the Great Prespa area



Source: GIS, 2015.

Cultural Heritage of the Great Prespa Region

The history of this area is closely connected with wars and contradictions between different nationalities. The mix of different cultures in this area provide a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The first inhabitants of the Prespa Region were Pelasgians and their descendants, the Illyrians. After them, came the Slavic tribes and also the Turkish occupation had a strong cultural influence in the Prespa Region.

Map.2. Cultural heritage of Great Prespa Region



Source: GIS, 2015

Most of the archeological sites located in the Region belong to the Neolithic period from which we can mention the Kallamas Neolithic site. One of the historic culture monuments is Golem Grad. Resen city was a Roman military base along the Egnatia road during the Roman Empire (Watzin, M .C, Puka, V. & Naumoski, T. B., 2002, 29). Remains of the military base are found in Golem Grad Island today.

The Egnatia Road was a road constructed by the Romans in the 2nd century BC. It crossed the Roman provinces of Illyricum, Macedonia, and Thrace, running through territory that is now part of modern Albania, the Republic of Macedonia, Greece, and European Turkey. Starting at Dyrrachium (now Durrës) on the Adriatic Sea, the road followed a difficult route along the river Genusus (Shkumbin), over the Candaviae (Jablanica) mountains and then to the highlands around Lake Ohrid. It then turned south, following several high mountain passes to reach the northern coastline of the Aegean Sea at Thessalonica. It

covered a total distance of about 1,120 km (696 miles / 746 Roman miles). The Via Egnatia was constructed in order to link a chain of Roman colonies stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Bosphorus (Shtylla, 1998, 45).

Golem Grad Island is known like the snake island because of the high number of water snakes present in the island shore. From the 14-th of July 2008 the island opened for tourism. The island is uninhabited and is under the protection of Galichica National Park staff. It has a rich biodiversity, which includes the terrestrial and water snakes, lizards and turtles (<http://www.arvati-etnoselo.com>). On the island, continuous studies about the cataloging of fauna and flora species and archeological sites are undergoing financed by UNESCO. Archaeologists have discovered until now nine archeological sites and the remains of IV-IX century churches.

The two most important religions in the Great Prespa Region are Greek-Orthodox and Muslim. In this sense, Religion is important, because it has inspired local people for the building of many religious monuments with spiritual-, historic-, artistic- and architec- tonic values. In this Region there are many churches despite the occupation for centuries of the Ottoman Empire.

San Maria Church is situated into a natural cave, in the southern part of Maligrad Island. This church has a square form. It was built in the XIV century with a wooden structure covered in stone. San Maria church mural paintings were painted in three different phases. The paintings date between 1345-1400 (Cultural Monuments Directory, 2014). On the church walls were found some graffiti and portraits of Kesar Novak family. These portraits are important because they document the artistic tastes of the local nobles of that time.

San Mitri Church lies in the center of Kallamas village in the Pusteci town. This church belongs to the XII century and was build mostly with stone. The paintings of the church represent mostly biblical scenes of the New Testament like the Evangelization and some of the saints portraits like: Saint Mari Platitera, Saint Stefan Protomartirin and Saint Romanoj Melodhos (Cultural Monuments Directory, 2014). The church took its name from one of the Saints, namely Saint Mitri. The church has undergone some structural damages in the northern walls that make the structure of the mural painting of the church not stable.

San Maria Church is placed in the center of Gollomboc village in Pustec town. The church has a small byzantine chapel in a rectangular form. It is thought that the church was built in the XIV century. San Maria church is decorated with high quality mural paintings that were built between the XIV-XVI centuries. Some of the mural pictures are severely damaged and need an immediate restoration.

San Maria Cave is located in the eastern part of Kallamas village, in Pusteci town, close to the Macedonian border. This church was found inside the cave, which was built in the XIII century (Cultural Monuments Directory, 2014). The cave is composed by two natural hollows from which the lowest hollow was used as a place for prayers. The walls of this hollow are decorated with a large iconographic cycle of paintings like: Evangelization, the Birth of Christ, Baptism, Resurrection of the Fair Lazar, etc..

The San Maria Cave is historically important because on one hand it shows a record of the monastery life in the Great Prespa Region and on the other hand, because the mural paintings found in the cave represent a transitional stage of religious art from the earlier

byzantine painting style, which started in the fourteenth century. In particular, this church paintings are evaluated for their free spirit and realism.

San George Church, Kurbinov – is another church close to Resen, Macedonia, that was built in 1191 on the Pelisteri mountain slope, in the village of Kurbinov (www.macedoniavision.com). Three anonymous but talented painters decorated the walls of the church with depictions from the life of Jesus. The paintings are from the twelfth century and represent some of the most noteworthy in Macedonia.

San Maria Monastery, Slivnica - This monastery was built in 1607 in a small village near Resen, Macedonia, with icons painted in 1612 (<http://info@macedoniavision.com>). Two of the original icons that are in a good state, are named *The Royal Doors* and *The Holy Cross*, which are carved from wood.

Haxhi Ramadani Mosque was build during the Ottoman occupations of this Region, in 1592 by Haxhi Ramadani Bej, and is located in the central part of Resen. The mosque may have been repurposed during the years of Soviet influence and currently the ground level is rented out as a store. The upper floor consists of the actual mosque.

Ahmed Niyazi Bey Saray is a historic neoclassical palace in Resen. The Ottoman Ahmed Niyazu Bey was a senior captain in the Ottoman army and was known for his active role in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. The Saray was built in the early twentieth century by the Ottoman Bey Ahmed Niyazu, as a French-style mansion. Unfortunately, he didn't live long enough to see his palace completed.

Today, this unique architectural style stands out from other buildings in the Great Prespa Region. It is used for the *Dragi Tozija House of Culture* which is a branch of the Museum of Macedonia in Skopje. It also houses the city library, as it has since the 1940s, which contains over 31,000 books (SWG, 2014, 19). Also in the Saray compound is the Resen Ceramic Colony - a member of the International Academy of Ceramics of UNESCO since 1973. This colony continues to keep alive the centuries-old traditional methods of making pottery in the Greater Prespa Region. More than 200 artists from all around the world have participated in its workshops. More than 800 works of Art are in the Colony's collection, from which 300 pieces are displayed in the museum (SWG, 2014, 21).

Finally, there is a permanent gallery of painter and national celebrity Keraca Visulceva (SWG, 2014, 21). Visulceva was a Bulgarian painter, which moved to Macedonia with her family during the Balkan wars. Vasulceva was a realist and post-impressionist painter. When the painter saw the Saray, she liked it so much that she asked to exhibit her paintings there, who are still nowadays situated there.

Conclusions

This Great Prespa Region has a rich cultural heritage in a rustic-, natural setting. As we mentioned above there are traces of Illyrians, Romans, Ottomans and Macedonians. The Region is also known for a mixture of Albanian and Macedonian culture that provide diversity in traditional dances, songs, costumes and agriculture.

Religion also is an important component of the cultural heritage. The above mentioned churches are a documentation of the importance of the Region. What is lacking in the Region is the infrastructure that is an important factor for the increase of visitors numbers.

In this sense, the most important project that will help the sustainable development of tourism in the Great Prespa Region was the 'Trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve Ohrid-Prespa watershed' project. The inauguration of which was made on 13-th of October 2014 by the UNESCO representative, in the presence of government officials from Albania and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and diplomatic corps. Thanks to this project, the Great Prespa Region will take a further step towards economic development and cultural preservation.

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