

Shumka, Laura; Rexha, Genta

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Religio. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. 31-45

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37601>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79934>

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Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20240606

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Heritage Tourism in Peripheral Areas: The Case of Saint George of Ioannina, a Symbol of Social Resilience in Southern Albania

LAURA SHUMKA – GENTA REXHA

Religious tourism is currently one of the most rapidly developing special forms of tourism worldwide. Due to historical circumstances, most importantly the totalitarian system before the 1990s, religious tourism in Albania has only started to develop in recent years. This article examines the importance of religious tourism in the light of religious, cultural or historical motivations for tourism. Using the example of specific monuments connected to Saint George of Ioannina, situated in the mixed religious population of south Albania, the contribution of religious tourism to local development is explored in order to identify development potential and propose policies that might help the region become a place of special interest for tourists. This survey also explores the importance of religious tourism as a special form of tourism that contributes to the development of areas with religious monuments, identifying options for exploiting and promoting such tourist destinations.

Cultural tourism based on different natural, architectural and religious structures or heritage sites pertaining to different time periods is presently one of the leading characteristics of the tourism sector, resulting in the development of specific tourism products including packaged tours and the creation of cultural heritage routes.¹ On a larger scale, various heritage

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- 1 Biljana Petrevska – Ivanka Nestoroska – Petar Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives for Creating Ottoman Heritage Packaged Tours in Macedonia”, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18/3, 2019, 288-309; “Establishing an Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes” [online], *Resolution CM/RES(2010)53*, Council of Europe 2022, <https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805cdb50>, 2010 [14. 3. 2022]; Elizabeta Dimitrova, “Animae Pulchrae: Depiction of Sainly Images in Byzantine Mural Painting” [online], in: Martha Peaslee Levine (ed.), *Perception of Beauty*, *IntechOpen* 2017, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.69265>>, 25. 10. 2017 [22. 5. 2022].



Religio: Revue pro religionistiku 32/1, 2024, 31-45.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37601>

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components represent an emerging tourism product that provides visitors with unique experiences based on historical traditions. In these contexts, the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism development is an organic one. With a focus on faith, this article seeks to investigate the issues of religion's role in the resilience that is prevalent in the present-day situations, strategies, and practices of people from diverse belief communities as well as ethnic and immigrant backgrounds. The concept of resilience continues to be widely employed and discussed within various situations and disciplines across the social and natural sciences, and has also been adopted in current policies.² Different authors have highlighted the ability and capacity of systems, organizations, individuals, cities, communities, and societies to overcome adversity and be able to maintain their core functioning, adapting positively in the face of strains or adverse conditions.³ Resilience trajectories may be uneven, with some people demonstrating resilience at one age but not another, or in one set of circumstances but not another. Some researchers have conceptualized resilience as one of a number of possible trajectories following severe stress or trauma.⁴ Therefore, these authors have identified the basic components that lead to resilience, with the ability to manage emotions, communicate effectively, and solve problems playing a critical role. Such processes are not strictly internal or biological, but may rather reflect the relationships or interlinkages between an individual and his or her environment.

There are only limited studies that address the Ottoman Empire and associated heritage sites from a tourism perspective,⁵ while the use of religious resilience in a mixed-religion society is very rarely considered from a tourism perspective. Tolerance and religious coexistence has remained a valued tradition among Albanians for centuries throughout different periods of history, which frequently surprises foreigners who see this as a unique case of religious coexistence⁶ and tolerance.⁷ On the basis of different approaches, many authors have arrived at common explanations for

2 E. Dimitrova, "Animae Pulchrae..."; "Establishing an Enlarged Partial Agreement...".

3 *Ibid.*; Florin Dolcos – Kelly Hohl – Yifan Hu et al., "Religiosity and Resilience: Cognitive Reappraisal and Coping Self-Efficacy Mediate the Link Between Religious Coping and Well-Being?", *Journal of Religion and Health* 60/4, 2021, 2892-2905.

4 E. Dimitrova, "Animae Pulchrae...".

5 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., "Prevailing Motives...".

6 E. Dimitrova, "Animae Pulchrae..."; Ferit Duka, "The historical background of religious tolerance in Albania", *International Symposium: Perspectives of religious, cultural and social diversity, in Balkans seen from a Global Perspective, 25-26 March 2011, organised in Tirana*, Tirana: Prizmi Publications 2012, 12-44.

7 David W. Foy – Kent D. Drescher – Patricia J. Watson, "Religious and Spiritual Factors in Resilience", in: Steven M. Southwick – Brett T. Litz – Dennis Charney et al., *Resilience and Mental Health: Challenges Across the Lifespan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011 [online], <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/>

religious resilience, including the suggestion that Albanians value their nationality above the various religious persuasions,⁸ or that Albanians have always been largely indifferent to religion.⁹ Looking to the past couple of centuries, religious tolerance has been present during different cultural and political milieus,¹⁰ arising from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of Albanian nationalism, the creation of the Albanian secular state,¹¹ the changes and fragmentations resulting from the processes of modernization, and the imposition of isolation and atheism by the communist regime.¹² In fact remarkable efforts have been made to maintain tolerance and unity throughout many historical eras while upholding the religious plurality of Albanian society.

This has been demonstrated in several ways. First, different religious communities have accepted the religious diversity that is present in the country and clearly reject the idea of the dominance of any given religion, regardless of the size of the respective religious communities.¹³ Furthermore, communities have expressed limited support for the notion that one religion is true and other religions are false. It is also worth mentioning that communities clearly confront negative attitudes towards religious groups or individuals.¹⁴ Even within the last three decades after the fall of communism, when the country experienced numerous riots and instability, none of the clashes or skirmishes were based on religious affiliation.

abs/resilience-and-mental-health/religious-and-spiritual-factors-in-resilience/FFE0F67312E1E0FC9C829C99D9B678D5>, 7. 9. 2011 [11. 4. 2022].

- 8 Gjergji Vurmo – Enis Sulstarova – Aleka Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania*, United Nations Development Programme Albania, Tirana: UNDP 2018 [online], <<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/al/English-report-religious.pdf>>, 26. 4. 2018.
- 9 Julio F. P. Peres – Alexander Moreira-Almeida – Antonia Gladys Nasello et al., “Spirituality and Resilience in Trauma Victims”, *Journal of Religion and Health* 46/3, 2007, 343-350.
- 10 Adam Izdebski – Lee Mordechai – Sam White, “The Social Burden of Resilience: A Historical Perspective”, *Human Ecology* 46/3, 2018, 291-303.
- 11 G. Vurmo – E. Sulstarova – A. Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania...*; Laura Shumka – Leonidha Peri – Entela Lato, “The Needs for Determining Degradation Risks from Temperature and Relative Humidity of Post-Byzantine Church Indoor Environment”, *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism* 11/3, 2020, 601-605; Konstantinos Giakoumis, “The Activity of the Painters from Linotopi in the Regions of the Orthodox Church of Albania”, in: Piro Thomo – Gaqo Bushaka (eds.), *2000 Years Church Art and Culture in Albania: Papers of the International Symposium, Tirana, 16-18 November 2000*, Tirana: Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania 2005, 229-257.
- 12 G. Vurmo – E. Sulstarova – A. Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania...*
- 13 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives...”; G. Vurmo – E. Sulstarova – A. Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania...*
- 14 *Ibid.*

How has this been accomplished and what was the role of churches during the post-Byzantine era, particularly during the turbulent times of the Ottoman Empire? The Byzantine and post-Byzantine era in the Balkans including the Albanian territory was marked by extensive church building.¹⁵ Church architecture during the 13th and 14th centuries and beyond was characterized by the crystallization of typological architectural particularities and a variety of planimetric and volumetric solutions. The distinction between churches built in monasteries and those built in cloisters may be seen by examining the functional solutions, the composition of the component elements, the architectural, decorative, and constructional solutions, as well as the exterior and interior decoration. Enlargements during the Ottoman Empire demonstrate how wide-ranging state interventions in local settlements and land use could aggravate rather than buffer environmental stress and amplify the scale of the social transformation it occasioned.¹⁶ There is very little evidence of the roles of natural or environmental stress and resilience, and also limited data regarding the role of societal resilience. Kalaja¹⁷ described how, from the late 16th to the early 17th centuries, the empire experienced a major crisis triggered by multiple environmental and human stressors, followed by a protracted and intermittent recovery in terms of population, agricultural production, political stability, and military power.¹⁸ This period of Ottoman history provides well-founded evidence of the burden of resilience in a pre-industrial Eastern Mediterranean society.¹⁹ Although the state and Ottoman dynasty were expanded, there was often a need to take into account regional particularities in both the human and natural dimensions.

For different historical and natural reasons, most post-Byzantine cultural heritage faced serious existential risk.²⁰ The degradation of mural

15 Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 2000; Ahmed Kalaja, “Issues on Religious Coexistence Tolerance in Albania (1912-1945)”, *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research* 5/6, 2016, 399-403.

16 Bryan S. Turner, “Religion in a Post-Secular Society”, in: Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to The Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2010, 649-667; Aleksander Meksi – Piro Thomo, “Arkitektura Pasbizantine në Shqipëri, Bazilikat”, *Monumentet* 80/19, 1981, 89-115.

17 A. Kalaja, “Issues on Religious Coexistence...”.

18 Özlem Ögtem-Young, “Faith Resilience: Everyday Experiences”, *Societies* 8/1, 2018, 1-10; Kenneth Pargament – Jeremy Cummings, “Anchored by faith: Religion as a resilience factor”, in: John W. Reich – Alex J. Zautra – John Stuart Hall (eds.), *Handbook of Adult Resilience*, New York (NY): The Guilford Press 2010, 193-210.

19 B. Turner, “Religion in...”.

20 H. Maguire, *The Icons...*; J. F. P. Peres – A. Moreira-Almeida – A. Gladys Nasello et al., “Spirituality and Resilience...”; Theofan Popa, *Mishkrime të Kishave në Shqipëri*, Tirane: Akademia e Shkencave, Instituti i Historisë, 1998, 23-55; Viktori Puzanova,

frescoes and other church materials occurred, mainly attributed to the influence of weather. A lack of maintenance (primarily roof structures) caused serious degradation, accelerated by moisture infiltration. Damage to roofs during this period was almost inevitable. In addition, numerous biological factors such as fungi and insects played a role. In the case of Albania specifically, there are other factors that contributed to the degradation, such as countless incidents of vandalism that occurred in the years following 1967, when Albania outlawed all forms of religion.

The churches and monasteries in the survey area are among the most attractive sites for a variety of visitors. Among them, the Figure of Saint George described here seems to be of particular interest in a mixed-religion population. George, i.e. Saint George, is very much honored by the Eastern Orthodox Church, wherein he is referred to as a “Great Martyr”.²¹ George is also venerated by some Christians and Muslims because of his composite personality combining several biblical, Quranic, and other ancient mythical heroes.²² Furthermore, in some references, he is identified with Elijah or Mar Elis, George or Mar Jirjus and in others as al-Khidr. The last epithet, meaning the “green prophet”, is common to Christian, Muslim, and Druze folk traditions. Samuel Curtiss, who visited an artificial cave dedicated to him, where he is identified with Elijah, reports that childless Muslim women used to visit the shrine to pray for children.²³ It seems that this help was sought by both Muslims and Christians. We believe that the local factors that we took into account in our survey are also to be found there.

Material and Methods

This survey had two main aims: (i) to perform a tourism flow analysis of existing tours by investigating the intentions/interests of visitors, and (ii) to assess the resilience of specific religions after the Byzantine era in south Albania as a demonstration of the authenticity and attractiveness of the place for tourists, while considering their role in the sustainability of very

Prapë mbi Artin Shqiptar të Shekullit 18, 2nd ed., Tirane: Buletini i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës 1958, 1-66; Laura Shumka, “Comparison of Indoor Climate Features Following Different Climate Guidelines in Conservation Examples of Selected Churches in Albania”, *International Journal of Conservation Science* 10/4, 2019, 623-630.

- 21 Mario Baghos, “On the Historical Existence of Saint George”, *The BASILIAN* 4/2, 2021, 13-22.
- 22 Scott B. Noegel – Brannon M. Wheeler, *The A to Z of Prophets in Islam and Judaism*, Lanham (MD): Rowman and Littlefield 2010.
- 23 Richard G. Hovannisian – George Sabagh (eds.), *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, 110.

fragile local economies. The survey also considered how organized tours might consider including the heritage of other religions, both tangible and intangible.

This study focused on the Saint Apostles Church, which is located in the village of Hoshteve, in the Zagoria region of south Albania (Fig. 1). The *in-situ* identification of different aspects related to religion was based on photo records and measurements at the church, collected during a field trip. The authors carried out a literature review and analysis of the several methods for achieving religious resilience from both a historical perspective (focused on the period of the post-Byzantine era) and an art history perspective associated with mural frescoes. In particular, the focus was on investigating possible research and methodological choices in understanding religious tolerance in Albania, and establishing a key connection to the main elements revealed in the Church of Saint Apostles through a study based on the local context. To achieve this, two research topics were formulated: First, to what extent are travel and site visits motivated by an interest in nature, religion (including heritage, both Christian and Islamic), food, and/or other factors? Second, what is the role of a specific religions' heritage, both tangible and intangible, in pursuing local tourism development and sustainability.



Fig. 1. Site location and external view of the Saint Apostles Church in Hoshteve, Gjirakastra, in the Zagoria region of south Albania

The investigation was based mostly on qualitative data obtained from in-person interviews with 17 tour guides who guided 8787 tourists in the Zagoria region. Further information was gathered through the examina-

tion of pre-planned excursions by regional and national travel agencies. Structured interviews with the tour guides were conducted as follows: (i) the interviewees were introduced to the purpose of the survey; (ii) the interviewees provided descriptions of the guided tours and outlined their main intentions; (iii) The interviewers were questioned regarding the goals and passions of the visitors; (iv) The respondents were asked how their experience and other visitor requests might be employed in the future development of guided tours.

Results and Discussions

The collected results are presented below and discussed under different thematic rubrics that resulted from the site survey data and that are in line with themes in the literature connecting the resilience among religions reflected in Post-Byzantine art works: the incorporation of local traditional costumes and those of the Ottoman era into decorations; advancing on already-existing grounds; and the use of locally-based motifs, female beauty, and their incorporation into the overall decoration. These topics describe the circumstances under which religions play a resilient role that improves the quality of local daily life.

Firstly, we discovered that church patronage offers crucial insights into the socioeconomic situation and social structure of the residents of these villages, particularly in terms of who donated resources to the churches and artwork on the walls, and how the donors were connected to the local communities. Similar approaches and findings have been found in other churches in the Zagoria region (such as Zheji and other villages), as well as reported by Seifried for Byzantine churches in the Southern Mani Peninsula, Greece.²⁴ That author emphasized the allocation of community resources to maintain religious infrastructure and personal commitment when discussing issues relating to church buildings themselves and ritual practices. All of these can be seen as components of a community-strengthening strategy that has enabled resilience and sustained survival through a period of collapse and regeneration.

Although in many periods of history religion has been considered a key element in understanding human behaviour,²⁵ it was significantly neglected during the 20th century, while recently there has been an important shift towards the consideration and use of religion as a tool of resilience in so-

24 Rebecca M. Seifried, "The Legacy of Byzantine Christianity in The Southern Mani Peninsula, Greece, After Imperial Collapse", in: Joanne M. A. Murphy (ed.), *Rituals, Collapse, and Radical Transformation in Archaic States*, New York (NY): Routledge 2021, 56-76.

25 L. Shumka, "Comparison of Indoor...".

ciety. This can be mostly demonstrated by social resilience in the form of diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect among communities of people of different religions. In many instances facing adversity seems to be an influential factor and it has been reported that returning to religions plays a role in responses to major life stressors.²⁶

What is the process by which resilience has been achieved on the global scale? Among different societies the challenges posed by increasing diversity as characterized by demographic and mobility patterns²⁷ among the communities living in particular areas and countries are also complex and varied.²⁸ Some of the particular challenges faced have been described as ‘new patterns of inequality and prejudice’; ‘new patterns of segregation’;²⁹ and issues around ‘trans-nationalism and integration’.³⁰ Similar issues might be features of the everyday lives of individuals belonging to different religions, ethnic minority communities, and migrant groups, requiring them to construct resilience and coping strategies from various resources.³¹ Furthermore, in addition to being multifaceted, resilience is dynamic rather than static.³²

The following themes have emerged from analyses of the church in the post-Byzantine period and its connections to the idea of resilience:

a) Current tourist interests and linkages to cultural heritage

The analysis of the guided tours found a considerable concentration of visits to just a few tourist destinations in the Zagoria area, with the central focus on post-Byzantine churches. As a result, there was a lack of expansion into other locations with other priceless destinations that could have been included in additional heritage tourism programs. Similar results were found by Petrevska et al.³³ The three major locations identified are linked with the Labova e Kryqit and Hoshteva Southern regions, which are the most economically undeveloped areas. 53% of visitors to the region expressed interest in the region’s religious traditions and values (Figs. 2

26 L. Shumka – L. Peri – E. Lato, “The Needs...”

27 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives...”; T. Popa, *Mishkrime të Kishave...*; L. Shumka – L. Peri – E. Lato, “The Needs...”

28 Piro Thomo, *Kishat Pashbizantine Në Shqipërinë e Jugut*, Tirane: Kisha Orthodhokse Autoqefale e Shqipërisë 1998.

29 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives...”

30 R. M. Seifried, “The Legacy of...”

31 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives...”

32 E. Dimitrova, “Animae Pulchrae...”; B. Turner, “Religion in...”; G. Vurmo – E. Sulstarova – A. Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania...*; Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011.

33 B. Petrevska – I. Nestoroska – P. Namicev et al., “Prevailing Motives...”

and 3). The second category of visitors was oriented to the natural beauty, landscape and protected areas that are present in the wider region, followed by 7% interest in food diversity, slow food, local production and guesthouse offer. According to the data presented in both Figures 1 and 2, only 1 % of the respondents showed other interests, including: local music such as polyphonic, other cultural monuments such as castles and stone bridges, etc.

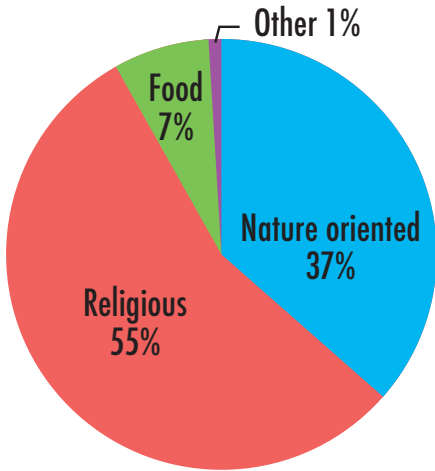


Fig. 2. The purposes of visits of 8787 tourists visiting Zagoria during June-July 2022³⁴

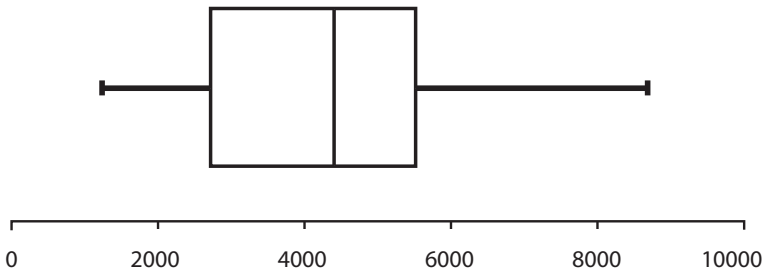


Fig. 3. A Box Plot representation showing that more than half of tourists were interested in religious sites in the survey area³⁵

³⁴ Authors' own research.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The data presented in Fig. 3 show how the box plot compares to the probability distribution function for a normal distribution of our case study, which considered 8787 tourists visiting the area. So, the median line is moderately high (4832), while the variability is relatively high, since the respondents are in interquartile boxes. This is clearly shown by the longer box, which reflects the greater the variability of the distribution. The figure clearly shows that this is a left-skewed distribution, as the median is closer to the higher values of the box.



Fig. 4. Saint George of Ioannina or Saint George junior, Saint Apostles church, Hoshteve, Albania (Photo by L. Shumka)

b) Incorporating local traditional costumes with those inspired by the Ottoman era in decorations and using them for tourism inspiration

The Saint George of Ioannina mural fresco, also known locally as Saint George Junior, stands out among the many original mural frescoes painted in 1843 because the saint is depicted wearing the local attire and hat (Fig. 4). The church has a basilica-style construction, covered with a system of arches and other elements typical of the post-Byzantine period. It is worth noting that the diversity of depictions in the frescoes studied here is in line with Eastern Orthodox iconography, where different appearances of George as a rider on a black horse³⁶ as well as the scenes of his torture and martyrdom can be found.³⁷ He may also be portrayed with Saint Demetrius, another early soldier saint. When the two saintly warriors are together and mounted upon horses, they may resemble earthly manifestations of the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Eastern traditions distinguish the two by George riding a white horse and Demetrius a red horse.³⁸ George can also be recognized by his actions, like spearing a dragon.

During the period of the Ottoman Empire, its economic and military activities and rapid expansion through the Balkans permitted the expansion of elements of Ottoman architecture and art in its areas. In Albanian territories, new stylistic elements associated many times with the landscape and its features flourished. As a result, it seems that components of post-Byzantine church resilience are incredibly rare on this regional scale; indeed, we discovered one of the rarest fresco decoration elements.

c) Building upon existing grounds

From our site observations, it is clear that the Saint Apostles church comprises both renovated structures (structures built on top of ruins or old basins) and the use of Paleochristian decorations. Different authors³⁹ have highlighted the way in which the sacred appearance is typologically determined in the realm of physical attractiveness. In addition to the fact that saintly representations adhere to artistic standards, the ability to remain resilient over time must be taken into account as a sign of the local community's tolerance and resilience (Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

36 Michael Collins, *St George and the Dragons: The Making of English Identity*, Brimscombe: Fonthill Media 2018.

37 Paolo O. Pirlo, *My First Book of Saints*, Parañaque City: Sons of Holy Mary Immaculate – Quality Catholic Publications 1997.

38 M. Collins, *St George...*; Erica Ferg, *Geography, Religion, Gods, and Saints in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Abingdon: Routledge 2020.

39 S. White, *The Climate...*; Sam White, "A Model Disaster: From the Great Ottoman Panzootic to the Cattle Plagues of Early Modern Europe," in: Nükhet Varlık (ed.), *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2017, 91-116.



Fig. 5. Paleochristian decorations dominating the lower parts of murals in Saint Apostles church, Hoshtevë, Albania (Photo by L. Shumka)

d) The use of locally based motifs and female beauty, and their incorporation into the entire decoration; tourist motifs

The decoration in the next room, dedicated to female prayer, has frescoes that refer to local beauty (Fig. 4). New insights into churches' uses in the lives and religious adherence of local residents show that Orthodox Christianity continued to play a critical role in the day-to-day lives of residents, not only when the Byzantine Empire was at its height,⁴⁰ but also after it collapsed, and during the Ottoman Empire. Compared to other churches, the Saint Apostles church in Hoshtevë, southern Albania, is an exceptional case. The use of traditional regional clothes in the decoration of mural paintings is also worthy of note.

In addition,⁴¹ during the Byzantine period, church frescoes not only functioned as visual paradigms for religious education through, but also as a universe of beliefs and attitudes molded into beautiful, eye-catching perspectives. In our situation, the local beauty included in the church decoration has two aspects: first, it goes beyond the didactic structure of the frescoes, and second, it acts as a social glue for the neighborhood, demonstrating resilience in situations or regions where religious affiliations are diverse. The coexistence of several religions at the same time, the visits between neighbors on special occasions, and the long history without conflicts are examples of this cohesion and tolerance.

⁴⁰ H. Maguire, "The Icons of...".

⁴¹ L. Shumka, "Comparison of Indoor..."; S. White, "A Model Disaster...".



Fig. 6. The use of local female beauty in frescoes in addition to didactic orthodoxies, Saint Apostles' church, Hoshtevë, Albania (Photo by L. Shumka)

The use of local female beauty in decoration – in our case, the same face in different positions – has been observed in many Orthodox churches. The figures have an aristocratic appearance, and it is likely that their purpose is to encourage a kind heart, sensitive femininity, and a loving disposition.

The link between religions and resilience was demonstrated in our case study. For Albanians, religious tolerance is demonstrated by instances such as mixed-religion marriages, the celebration of religious festivals of other groups and the centuries-long peaceful coexistence of Albanians of different religious backgrounds and the lack of religious conflict.⁴²

42 G. Vurmo – E. Sulstarova – A. Papa, *Religious tolerance in Albania...*

Conclusion

The prevailing specific political and economic conditions in Albania in the last three decades as well as around the world have influenced trends in the development of all forms of tourism. The importance of religious tourism to local economies is demonstrated by the results of the current survey. By leveraging the comparative advantage of this industry, new destinations that cater to niche markets can be developed to attract visitors. The decorations of mural paintings express a resilient character that is also seen in the religious tolerance among many communities in southern Albania throughout the period of medieval church life and art. Despite being uncommon, their presence permeates the entire decoration.

Southern Albania and the Zagoria region in particular exhibit a rich range of natural and cultural resources, with unique characteristics of beauty and authenticity, elements that are required for the design and development of specific forms of tourism. However, due to a lack of tourism development, advertising, and product enhancement, the industry hasn't yet met expectations. For the more effective use and development of religious tourism in the region, it is necessary to properly streamline local plans and strategies following development priorities and appropriate means of implementation.

Such priorities in developing religious tourism should take into account the benefits of the environment and the characteristics of particular holy sites, as these are representations of religious heritage and cultural characteristics. A primary prerequisite for the sustainable development of religious tourism in combination with other special forms is the undertaking of synergic actions by all actors and organizations in the public and private sectors. In addition, there should be general acceptance that a site will become a place of special tourist interest.

Finally, emphasis should be placed on different funding mechanisms including EU programs; the upgrading of guest houses; investment projects for the establishment, expansion and modernization of local accommodation; as well as strengthening the competitiveness of services provided in the field of tourism and entertainment.

SUMMARY

Heritage Tourism in Peripheral Areas: The Case of Saint George of Ioannina, a Symbol of Social Resilience in Southern Albania

This paper investigates the role of religious tourism in local and regional development, featuring the case study of a church reflecting the resilience of local communities, in developing sustainable and specific organized tours. The main focus is an analysis of prevailing motives and the creation of tourist visits to south Albania. Five centuries of Ottoman presence in Albania and other Balkan countries has left visible traces combining culture and religion. The occupation itself and Ottoman rule (1392-1912) was characterized by different waves, these introducing numerous elements of oriental art, construction, and architecture into the local heritage. Data were collected from municipal and regional entities using a survey of the perceptions of, and attitudes towards the development of heritage tourism. Various aspects of art, such as the mural frescoes depicting Saint George of Ioannina at the Holy Apostles Church in the southern Albanian village of Hoshteve, illustrate Albania's endurance during the post-Byzantine period.

The religious diversity of Albanian society and the preservation of social harmony and religious tolerance, particularly during the recent transitional period, has been of particular importance. The analyses show a clear connection between religious tourism and the advancement of a sustainable local economy. The article's conclusions highlight the need for coordination between public and private entities as well as tourism management plans in order for regions to have a successful future as destinations for heritage tourism. As such problems are similar to those faced elsewhere, the findings of this survey can be applied to other peripheral areas.

Keyword: Post-Byzantine; resilience; cultural heritage; religious tourism; Albania

Faculty of Applied Sciences and Creative Industries LAURA SHUMKA
Barleti University
Rruga Frang Bardhi 1 arch.co@umb.edu.al
Selite, Tirana 1025
Albania

Faculty of Applied Sciences and Creative Industries GENTA REXHA
Barleti University
Rruga Frang Bardhi 1 genta.rexha@umb.edu.al
Selite, Tirana 1025
Albania