

A historical & regional overview of Saranda, and its relations with the Finiq area

The beginnings and key moments in the development of the city-region of Saranda.

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Abstract - The history summarized in this article helps to understand the main events and signs of the territory, which marked the beginnings of the settlement, as well as the key moments in the development of the region of Saranda, part of which is also the territory of what is today called Finiq Municipality. Historical analyses serve to place a city, a municipality, or a region in the continuum of space-time connections. Thus, the history of the region of Saranda, and the surrounding territories, is told in function of the purpose of the last issue of this scientific magazine (*OMB Journal*) that focuses on the territory of Finiq municipality. Finiq serves as a kind of agricultural support area, and a hinterland background for the city of Saranda (the main urban gravity in this territory surrounded by sea and mountains). The short article does not pretend to be a detailed history of the city and region. But key moments of history follow various names to the city and its surrounding area, and this helps to better understand the relation to the main happening events associated with them. The following material refers mainly to documents written by authors such as Hodges (2007, 2011), Ceka (2002, 2006), as well as other authors cited in the text.

From "Onchesmos" to the "Forty Saints", "Porto-Eda" and Saranda ...

The first name of Saranda, "Onchesmos", according to Hodges (2007, p. 12), comes from the Trojan Anchises, from whose union with the goddess Aphrodite, on Mount Ida, Aeneas was born. The latter, according to the stories, fled from Troy during the journey of the Trojan refugees towards the Central Mediterranean with his son Ascanius carrying his wounded father, Anchises, on his back. This scene also appears in many artistic images (Fig1). Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.51.1-2, in Hodges 2007, pp. 12-13) calls Onchesmos "the port of Anchises" and tells how the Trojans, sailing from Buthrotum along the coast, reached in a place called "the harbor of Anchises", and there they dedicated a "temple to Aphrodite". The name Onchesmosis also mentioned by other authors, such as Cicero in his correspondence with Titus Pomponius Atticus (Letters to Atticus 7.2.1, in Hodges 2007, p. 13); and Strabo in his "Geography" (7.7.5,

in Hodges 2007, p. 13) written in the Augustan period, implying that it was ... a port with access to Phoenice ... (the area of present-day Finiq). Also, according to Ceka (2002 p. 14), Onkezmi is mentioned for the first time by Strabo in the c. I, BC, when ... it served as a Phoenician pier ..., where the area of today's Phoenicia (Finiq) is again referred to. (Fig2).

According to Ceka, from c. II AD, Onkezmi developed as a separate city, and in the c. IV AD was fortified. The walls of the castle can be seen, which had a perimeter of 850 m, one side of which rested on the coast, and a surface of 5 ha (Fig3). As a result of the change of the coastline, the southern wall was destroyed and from this fragment today the ruins of a tower with a brick arched entrance are preserved. On the northern sides, from where possible attacks were expected, the walls were also reinforced with quadrangular, polygonal, and circular towers (Ceka 2002, p. 14, 15). From the ruins of the surrounding walls of the city, parts of which are visible on the



Fig1 / Aeneas during the journey of the Trojan refugees to the Central Mediterranean with his son Ascanius, carrying on his back the father, wounded Anchises source / author

coastal promenade, it is understood that Saranda and its region were under the Roman Empire until the century. IV AD.

Hierocles mentions Onkezmi in the first half of the c. VI AD, as ... one of the main cities of the province of Old Epirus ..., being at the same time the episcopal center (Ceka 2006, p. 11). A number of early Christian churches are also associated with this period. The three-nave basilica, adapted within a pre-existing building, is located within the castle walls and west of today's main square. This basilica and its floor mosaics, which are among the best-preserved architectural monuments of the late antique period, are thought to have served as a synagogue, at least for a time. Excavations have shown that the basilica was built over an earlier building. Also, another cult construction of the c. V AD is found near the actual post office. This role of the city is preserved until the end of the c. VI AD, when the Slavic floods destroyed it (Ceka 2002, p. 15) (Fig4).

The further identity of Saranda and its region is related to the "monastery of the Forty Saints of Sebaste" built at the end of the c. V AD or the beginning of the c. VI AD on the hill above the city of Saranda (Fig5). The "Forty Saints" or "martyrs of Sebaste", are thought to have been soldiers of the twelfth Roman legion who refused to give up their Christian faith. For this reason, they were tortured and then killed by order of the Roman emperor Licinius in AD 320 (Pettifer Julia, and Pettifer James 2007, pp. 22-23). The cult of the "forty saints" spread especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

According to Hodges, the first reference to

the use of this name appears in the chronicles of the Crusader abbot, Benedict of Peterborough, and dates to 1191. He describes the ruins of Onchesmos as Sancta Karentet (Stubbs 1867: 205, in Hodges 2007, p. 14). We can thus assume that this name began to be used between late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Church of the Forty Saints, an important pilgrimage center, with its unique design and significant size was a clearly recognizable sign above the sea to attract both: the Christians of the Adriatic coast; and the locals (including people from the Finiq area) or those from the interior of the Balkans. According to Ceka, the church was 50 m long, with an entrance passing through the Exonarthex and the Narthex. This unique space was divided into seven apses. The Church of the Forty Saints also had a crypt built in the c. VI AD, which served as a cemetery, with an entrance on the southern side (2002, p. 17). In the book of the Center for Albanological Studies, Institute of Archaeology, (2013, p. 231), Kozma Thesprotos is quoted, describing the Church of the Forty Saints as he saw it in 1830: "On the hill... the ruins of a large Christian temple, with a large underground structure, subdivided into many small churches ..."; according to this source, the first to sketch a schematic plan of the church and to relate the time of the church's construction to the fortified city of Anchiasmos was W. M. Leake. As Hodges also points out in "Eternal Butrint", with its unusual plan, this church was unique and finds parallels in the multi-aisled triclinia of late antiquity, such as the banquet hall in the Palace of Laus in Constantinople; while some other

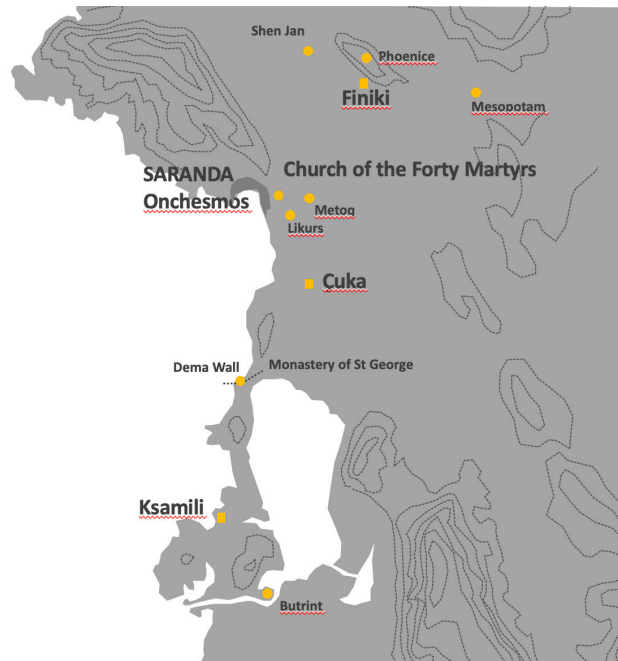


Fig2 / Onkezm, territory, signs
source / author

features are found in the martyria of the early Christian period (Hodges 2006, p. 219).

According to Hodges, the basilica founded around 500 AD was served by a monastery, which continued to exist until c. XIV and XV, when the fortunes of this monastery changed due to the Ottoman occupation. The buildings of the monastery, as well as the rooms for the reception of pilgrims, began to fall into disrepair, while the church continued to be used until the middle of the c. XIX under the care of a small

community of monks. The basilica was then abandoned and fell into disrepair until the building was destroyed by German artillery in 1944. Despite the destruction, the crypt is quite well preserved. It consists of a labyrinth of rooms, vaulted halls, corridors, and chapels, which are located below the narthex and the south-eastern wing of the church. By the late 1950s, the hill was declared a military zone and was inaccessible until 1997 (Hodges 2007, pp. 30-32).

Saranda and its region reached the end

of their prosperity during the Late Antiquity period around the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th century, which may also be related to the Slavic attack on the Epirote coast, which is also evident from the traces of fires. According to Hodges (p. 35), who refers to Lakos, during the excavations of the basilica/synagogue layers were discovered which contained traces of cremation and which coincided with similar layers found by Ugolini in Phoenix (Bowden 2003: 199, in Hodges, p. 35). Thus, from the beginning of the c. VII it seems that even though most of Saranda was abandoned, the basilica/synagogue continued as a place of worship, perhaps with a core of buildings around it. Further, new settlements were created between c. XV and c. XVIII around the castle of Lëkureš (Fig6) in the highest parts of the hill and in front of the church of the Forty Saints. The abandonment of Saranda as a seaport is described as castellum desertum by Benedict of Peterborough and this after Himara and Butrint were used as the main seaports from the c. XIII of the Despots of Epirus. Likewise, the Venetians also invested more in Butrint (Hodges 2007, p. 35). From the end of the century XVIII, with the increase of trade in the Adriatic regions, Ali Pasha Tepelena made several investments in Saranda that revitalized the old port (Hodges 2007, p. 36).

Saranda as a Port-Region

The castle we see today on the ridge of

hills facing south, Lëkuresi, dates from the beginning of the c. XIX and the period of Ali Pasha Tepelena, on the basis of the previous c. XVI and c. XVII. It is also interesting that the Venetian sources of the c. XVII and c. XVIII treated both Santi Quaranta and Licurius as two separate places, which, on a modest scale, developed trade in agricultural products with Corfu (Hodges 2007, p. 15). The village of Lëkurës existed until 1878, when the inhabitants left due to the failure of their uprising against the Turkish forces (Pettifer Julia, and Pettifer James 2007, p. 22). In the period of the Ottoman occupation, the population consisted mostly of soldiers stationed in barracks. The British diplomat Leake, who visited the area in 1804, also gives a description of Saranda itself, which he calls Skala, with the ruins of the Roman walls in a semicircle, the diameter of the part of the urban beach today, surrounded on the sides by about twenty towers. Among the walls and dwellings of Limeni, Skala, or Skaloma, he notices the remains of a ruined suburb. Within the walls are the ruins of a church, cistern, and dwellings (Leake 1835:10, in Hodges, p. 16). According to Pallini and Scaccabarozzi (2014, p. 11), the travelers of the c. XIX described Saranda itself as a small village with modest buildings, for the protection of the port that served for coastal navigation, connected to the port located opposite the island of Corfu. So the city was at that time more a local gateway to the rural hinterland for the villages of Finiq area, and from Delvina



Fig3 / The ruins of the surrounding walls of the city; the fortifications of the c. IV AD with an area of 5 ha, one side rested on the coast
source / Hodges, 2007



Fig4 / Paleo-Christian basilica within the surrounding walls, which is thought to have also served as a synagogue
source / author



Fig5 / Monastery of the Forty Saints of Sebastia
source/author



Fig6 / Lëkursi Castle
source/author



Fig7 / Edward Lear (April 1857) Saranda, the church of the Forty Saints and Lekursi

to Konispol, as well as further east toward Dropull and Gjirokastra area. Edward Lear also reflected in his sketch of April 22, 1857: Saranda, the church of the "Forty Saints" and Lëkurs. Lear makes us understand that the western walls with their towers were very well preserved by the time he made his drawing (Fig7) (Hodges 2007, p. 16). Meanwhile, the name Santi Quaranta was changed to Saranda.

After the declaration of Albania's independence in 1912 (and the social and political uncertainty that accompanied this act), relative stability was established between the 1920s and 1930s, especially after King Zog came to power. The initial presence of the Austrian army in the first years of independence helped to somewhat structure Saranda and the region from ... a quasi-geographical reference ... to ... a settlement structure that began to be identified. Meanwhile, Saranda's status as a "müdür-luk" (independent unit) within the District (Kaza) of Delvina at the end of the Ottoman Empire had given it the identity of an urban-residential gravity independent of the influence of Ioannina and Preveza (Kokolakis 2003, p. 204). By increasing the role of the port, Saranda would further create economic independence for its entire region. During the Balkan turmoil of the post-independence period, Saranda and the region around it would be strengthened even more as an independent rural-urban-port center thanks to transitional experiences such as those of the Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus (1914) (Hodges 2007, p. 17), which had a very short life and was further followed by the Italian Protectorate of Albania (1916-1920) (Stickney 1927 p. 644-645; Nigel 2001 p. 17). Thus, the port began to gain even more importance during the years of the First World War, 1915-1918, when it was transformed into a base of the Italian military navy (Guida Albania, 1940, p. 141). Likewise, during the period of King Zog's government during the years 1934-1936, Saranda also had a brief experience as the territory of a Romanian concession given to the historian and politician Nicolae Iorga, for his contribution to the political and cultural promotion of Albania in Europe. The latter donated the territory of Saranda to the Romanian state, which created the "Romanian Foundation" of Saranda with headquarters near the port of the city (the work of the Romanian architect Petre Antonescu) (fig. 1.8), an institution that operated between 1934-1944 (Tanasescu and Paunescu 2011). The territory was taken back by Italy during the invasion of 1939. However, all these experiences, albeit

brief, helped to create a somewhat "appropriated" European identity of Saranda as a city; as an urban gravitation; and as a port region, with many dispersed villages and other settlements around the in-land territory, compared to many other modest urban centers in the south of Albania, which had an isolated rural and Ottoman nature.

In this period, especially the relations with Italy intensified cooperation that served to build a kind of national territorial vision for the economy, infrastructure, and development of the territory, including fifteen main urban centers of the country (Saranda as well). The Italian contribution to the "modernization" of Albania includes three consecutive periods (Pallini and Scaccabarozzi 2013, p. 1); which began before the First World War, when Italy and Austria were decisive in the creation of the independent Albanian state (a period with the first infrastructural operations in the country, which until then inherited the backward network from the traces of the Ottoman and Roman infrastructures). Further on, this contribution was more concrete during the period of King Zog's government, especially between 1925 and 1938, when Mussolini focused on the penetration of Italy into the Albanian economy through the establishment of SVEA (Society for the Economic Development of Albania - Societa per lo Sviluppo Economico dell'Albania). In function of such structure, a plan was drawn up for the public works, which would also facilitate better exploitation of the natural resources of the country.

Since the occupation of Albania by Fascist Italy, between 1939-1943, a "Central Office for the Construction and Urbanism" was established, with a team of Italian and local architects/engineers. Urban plans were drawn up for the main Albanian cities, among which the main attention was given to the Vlora-Saranda region. The focus on Saranda, both for Zogu and later on for Mussolini, had two main reasons.

First, the great history and the rich archaeological findings were a perfect narrative fitting to the political setup of a "new European identity of post-Ottoman Albania". In connection with this issue, Zogu and Mussolini developed a personal interest in the work of the Italian archaeologist Luigi Maria Ugolini, who from 1914 carried out intensive excavations in the areas of Finiqand Butrint, and in 1927 published the journal *Albania Antica* (Ugolini, 1927). Such topic as a whole and the interesting findings in this field favored the engineering of the new political identity on the "com-

mon roots" of Albania and Italy, moreover in the context of an equally subtle political confrontation with the historical influence of Greece, and the historical stratification of Epirus in the region. Subsequently, this would also arouse strategic interest in investments in infrastructure, military, and agriculture; in the broad framework of a strategic cross-border port region.

Second, the cross-border port region and the strategic geographical position of Saranda, as part of a more important geopolitical project that had provoked debate at different times. It is about the so-called trans-Balkan railway, which was supposed to be developed parallel to the historical road/corridor "Via Egnatia" (via nostra militaris) of the Roman Empire, which had lost its importance during the Venetian rule, due to their promotion of water corridors. The strategic trans-Balkan railway project was first proposed in 1852 by the Turkish government and re-proposed by the Germans at the end of the same century (nowadays implemented by the European project of Igoumenitsa Euro-Port and Egnatia Odos in Greece). After the occupation of the port of Vlora, with the coming to power of Mussolini, this project was brought back to the scene (Ugolini 1927). Thanks to the influence of the Bari Chamber of Commerce, in addition to Durrës and Shengjin, special attention was also given to the ports of Vlora and Saranda (Godoli, 2012). These port regions (in addition to their direct sea connections with southern Italy, Greece, and Turkey), were seen as the main gateways of the trans-Balkan corridor: Vlora, for the trans-Balkan railway (Buonomo, 1918; Pallini and Scaccabarozzi, 2014, p. 3); and Saranda, for the road corridor Saranda-Delvina-Muzina-Gjirokastër-Tepelenë-Përmet, as well as road connections with Ioannina in the south and with Korça, Florina, Manastir, and Thessaloniki in the east (Pallini and Scaccabarozzi, 2012, p. 12). So, the public investments of Zog's Albanian government, as well as the "strategic assistance" of Mussolini's Italian government, served to "re-establish" even cities like Vlora and Saranda in the post-Ottoman period. Thus, Vlora had investments in the port and roads since the First World War, while Saranda mainly in the years 1940-43.

The coastal axis Vlorë-Saranda (-Igoumenica) was built during the Italian occupation based on the preliminary works of the Austrian army during the First World War. While the road axis of Muzina Pass (passing along the Finiq area, via Foinikea old settlement, and Blue Eye springs) was

conceived as a "road corridor" that penetrated through the mountains deep in the region of Epirus (and Greece), and that had at the top a kind of an "eye" that penetrated deep into the Mediterranean seas through the port-region of Saranda (Pallini and Scaccabarozzi, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, Saranda and Finiq were strategic crossroads on these two axes. During the Second World War, in June 1939, with the occupation of Albania by Fascist Italy, the city of Saranda received the name "Porto-Eda", a name it kept until 1944. This name was given in honor of the eldest daughter of Benito Mussolini, Countess Edda Ciano Mussolini, married to Galeazzo Ciano, who was at the same time Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, a personage with a lot of influence regarding Mussolini's decision-making on Albania. The direct association of the new name of Saranda and its region with Mussolini also indicated the strategic importance of Saranda as a naval base for controlling flows in the Corfu Channel. Although Saranda kept this name for a very short period, which did not even reach five years, during this period it was included and referred to as one of the main cities of Albania to be equipped with regulatory plans. For a short time, in October 1944, Saranda was also occupied by the British fleet as part of operations to prevent the German army from leaving Corfu.

During the Cold War period, Saranda and the Finiq area were considered border city-region, due to their geographical proximity to Greece, especially to the island of Corfu and the inland border with Greece. The communist regime in Albania tried to maintain a touristic profile for Saranda city, naturally dedicated to domestic tourism, although with very limited capacities compared to Durrës, Vlora, and Shengjin. The surrounding region with several villages of Greek minority living in Albania (including the territory known today as the municipality of Finiq) was left in a "natural" state and mainly focused on agriculture. The infrastructure development somehow froze, and there were no developments in this direction, except meeting some basic needs for the purpose of defense and agriculture, as a result of the isolationist policies pursued by the regime. Visitors were not allowed to access the villages or archaeological sites in the areas near the border unless they had special permission.

Saranda "Locus Solus" - place, event, and signs (Eisenman, 1984, p. 7)

As described above, Saranda as a settlement and region originated in a specific and distinct place in the country's ter-

ritory. The special characteristics of the geographical territory (the coastline, the first coastal hills, the plains-valleys behind them, the second belt of hills, and finally the mountains massifs behind them with a unique silhouette and scenery) have been part of the success of the continuity of Saranda as a city and region. Even the existence of the "archipelagos" of surrounding villages, together with the very important archaeological assets, gravitate towards the main city and increase its importance even more. The topographic relief itself in the form of a "natural theater" of the surrounding mountain massifs further stimulates this gravitation, isolating it historically from the rest of the inland country, and orienting it more toward the port and sea. This argument leads us to discover something more about the concept of a specific place or locus. We can recall here Ross when he deals with this issue in the book "Architecture of the City", as well as Eisenman's comments (Eisenman 1984, pp. 3-11) in the introduction to this book. First, Ross notes that the choice of site for both a building, village, and city carried primary importance in the classical world. According to them, the country was possessed by the "genius loci", the local deity who was thought to mediate everything that the country would unfold (Ross,

1984, p. 103).

Further, he quotes Paul Eydoux (in Ross, p. 106), who talks about places that are considered unique. According to him, these places seem to be predetermined by history, they are signs of space, placed both by chance and by the course of events that repeat themselves; or create as we call it differently: tradition. As the first inhabitants shape an environment, they create a specific place and define its uniqueness. Thus, buildings, monuments, and the city are transformed into something human and are deeply connected to an event or a first sign, to their stability and evolution, to coincidence or repeated events in the form of tradition. In this sense, if we follow the logic of Ross (1984, p. 107), the uniqueness of an urban artifact begins in the event and in the sign that marked the beginning of this event. The specific place or locus as Ross calls it, as a particular artifact, is defined by its space and time, by its topographical dimension and form, by being the place of continuity of past and present events, by the memory of his own (Ross, 1984, p. 107). As Eisenman reinforces in the preface of the same book, (1984, p. 7) locus solus is the triple relationship of place, event, and sign. Thus, what interests us in the framework of this article, the locus is the place where archi-

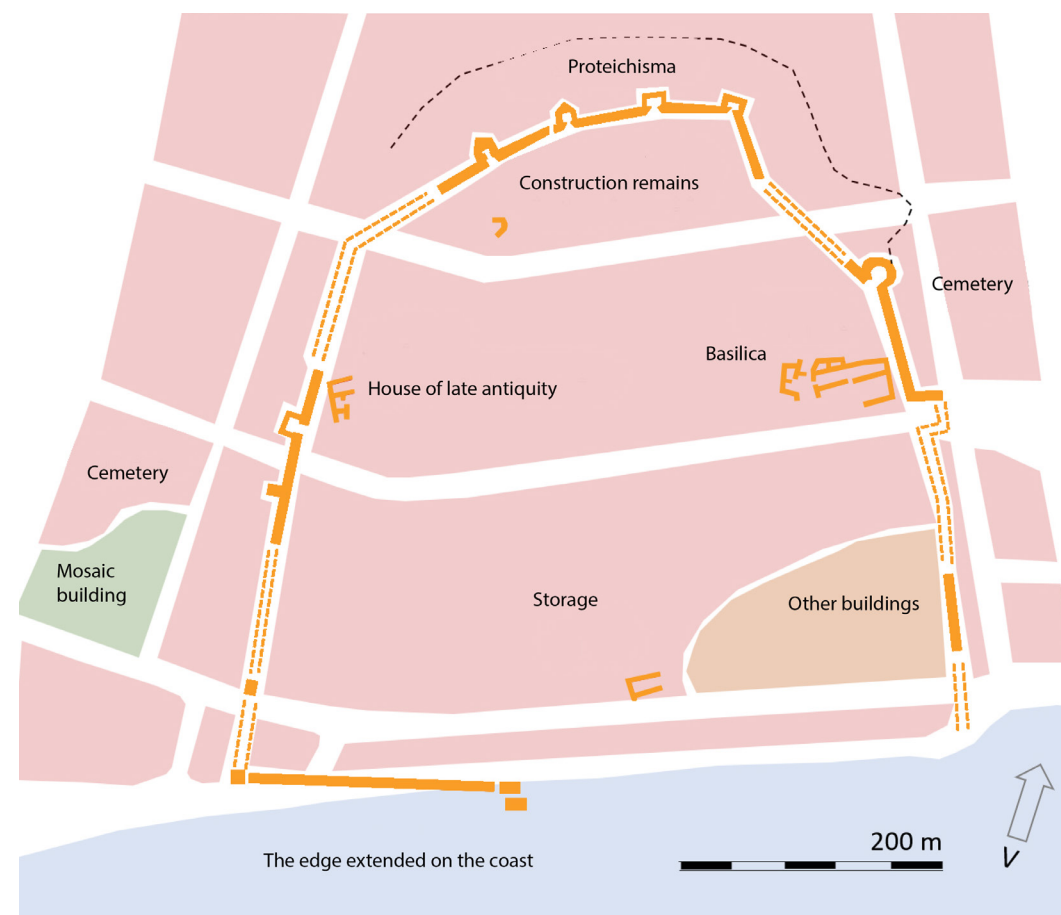


Fig8 / The Roman Foundation of Saranda source / author

ecture or forms are carved.

In relation to the above, it seems that there are two events and signs that contribute to the formation of the identity and continuity of Saranda and its region as a place of residence:

First, the temple of Aphrodite. It cannot save us without recalling here what Hodges emphasizes in the book *Saranda Ancient Onchesmos*. He writes that ... it was the temple of Aphrodite that probably made it an active port region in the Republic period, when in the 50s AD Cicero sailed from here to Italy (Hodges 2007, pp. 37-38). As described in the paragraphs above, it was the flight of Aeneas from Troy with his son Ascanius and his wounded father Anchises, during the Trojans' journey to the Central Mediterranean, that gave rise to the sign associated with it, the temple of Aphrodite. When the Trojans, sailing from Buthrotum along the coast, reached the place called the port of Anchises (which in this context can also be considered as a "predetermined" sign of the geographical placeholder), they dedicated a temple to him there Aphrodite's. Furthermore, it was the very sign of the temple of Aphrodite that guaranteed the characteristics of the locus solus of Saranda, which is also the key to its continuity as a settlement and further on as a region, and that, starting from that place, repeated events would begin the return to traditions.

Secondly, the monastery of the "Forty Saints", a large structure located on a hill, as various authors cited in the text point out, in its heyday must have been one of the most distinctive basilicas from the side views in the Central Mediterranean basin (Hodges, 2006, p. 2019). It is also clear in this case the importance of the geographical placeholder with the places that seem to be "predetermined" and the role of the event of the "martyrs of Sebasta", which gave rise to the sign associated with it, the "Monastery of the Forty Saints". For the following period, this was the most distinctive sign that guaranteed the characteristics of the locus solus of Saranda.

The first two names of Saranda: Onchesmos and the Forty Saints, associated with the events described above, actually express two important phases of the development of the city-region. I) The first, is related to the period of the Roman Empire, starting from c. I, until the end of the century II, or the beginning of the century III. In this period, Saranda was a "walled port" and a modest settlement. II) The second phase, spans a little more than a century, starting from the end of the V to the end of the VI centuries. Dur-

ing this period, the city with its defensive walls and churches seems to have been not only a thriving port, but also the entry point (for "Phoenice" in history, and later on ...) for the magnificent monastery of the "Forty Saints" and. III) The third name of Saranda, "Porto-Eda", which lasted for a few years, was a glory that never came. Like the origin of its name, this brief phase of the city was destined to suffer its own fate of fascism in Italy and elsewhere. More than reality, this name showed the political and geo-strategic importance of the Saranda region, an untapped potential for centuries. However, the construction method proposed by the plan, which bears the same name, can still be clearly read in the general formulation of the city structure, which today constitutes its most consolidated urban heart. However, even in this case, the regional perspective was an even stronger element of territorial development. The ideas of the "coastal road axis" and "Balkan road corridor" still radiate nowadays in the development of infrastructure and the cross-border region between Greece-Albania-Italy, but now under the perspective of integration and cooperation.

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