

Historic Cultural Landscapes Across Political Borders Connecting Communities and Cultures - case of Prespa Lake

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Abstract - This report shows the research undertaken by the 39th PhD cycle Cultural Heritage Landscape Group, in the framework of the Joint International PhD Program IDAUP between POLIS University and University of Ferrara. The Cross-Border Region of the Prespa Lakes and Pustec Municipality, the case study of this research, was framed as the intersection of infrastructural, environmental, cultural and habitation landscapes. Located in the southeast of Albania, Pustec Municipality borders with Greece and North Macedonia, all of three countries sharing the Prespa Lakes. The environmental richness and the wider multidimensional ecological importance of the zone led jointly the three countries to establish the Prespa Transboundary Park in 2000. Very rich also in terms of cultural heritage, this site testimonies the continuous presence of human settlements starting from the Neolithic Age and continuing today. Byzantine hermitages and examples of stone masonry vernacular architecture, are identifying cultural heritage elements of the region. Despite the richness, multiple territorial, social, and environmental problems have been identified in the site. They have led to isolation, shrinking, migration, and emigration of the local population. In response to these problems, cultural heritage was proposed as one of the four fields of inquiry of the PhD Workshop and was followed by this PhD research group. Under a shared vision of Pustec as capable of valorising the potentials and mitigating the problems, the cultural heritage landscape PhD group envisioned to enhance the cultural heritage in its broadest sense. It explored the interrelation of historic built environment with the geomorphology of the site, as potential drivers for sustainable development. Adopting a holistic multi-scale approach, the PhD research group proposed reintegration of the dispersed cultural heritage assets into a coherent landscape system as key to limit depopulation, restore continuity and enhance territorial identity of the region and particularly of Pustec Municipality.

Keywords - Historic Landscape, Cultural Heritage, Heritage-Led planning, Geomorphology, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Pustec Municipality is in southeast Albania, bordering with Greece (southeast) and North Macedonia (north and east). All three countries share the two-freshwater tectonic Prespa Lakes. A third lake being Lake Ohrid, is located just thirty kilometers away and is inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The Great Prespa lake is shared between Albania, Greece and North Macedonia; while the Lesser Prespa Lake between Albania and Greece. The two Prespa lakes, and the mountains surrounding them create a natural paradise rarely encountered elsewhere. The region is an example of the harmonic coexistence of human and nature and it was the first National Park to be designated in 1992 in Albania after the communist regime fall. Aware of the wider and multidimensional ecological

importance of the zone, the three countries jointly established the Prespas Transboundary Park in 2000, the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans. The National Park in Albania comprises both terrestrial and aquatic components (including Maligrad Island) and its boundaries correspond with the watershed of both Prespa lakes. The terrestrial ecosystem is dominated by the mountain massif of Mali i Thatë (Dry Mountain) which extends in North Macedonia with the Galicica Mountain range. The entire Prespa region hosts unique habitats and species that are important from both a European and a global conservation perspective.

The historic and cultural richness of the region is described in many sources (see section 2.1). According to Bunguri et al [1], the earliest

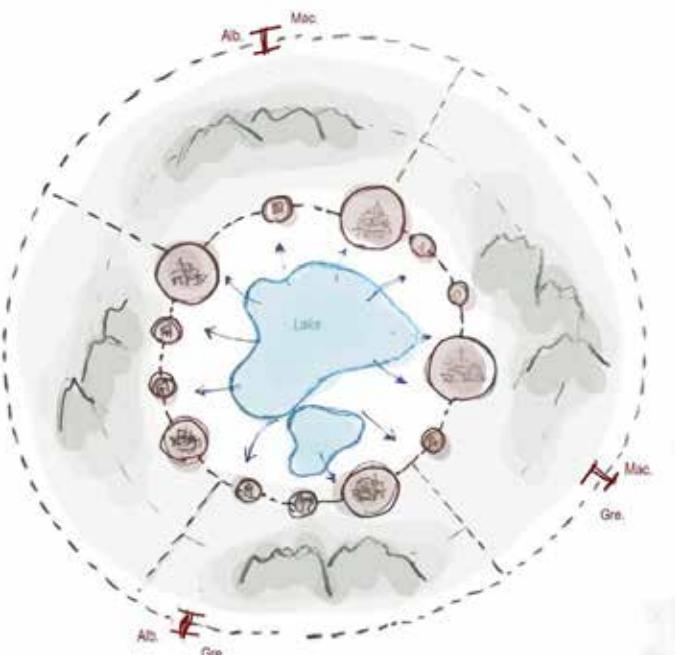


Fig. 1. Strategy. Source/ Authors

archaeological evidence of the presence of human settlements in this region dates back to the Neolithic Age. Subsequently the region hosts significant heritage assets from the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods up to the early 20th century. Sources show that documented human presence emerges around 2nd century BC when Prespa region became part of the Roman Provinces. After a short period as the first seat of Czar Samuel of Bulgaria, the territory was reconquered by the Byzantine in 1018, period when the seat of the Archbishop of Ohrid was established. After the 12th century, the region passed under subsequent rules of the Despot of Epirus, Michael II Angelus and of the Emperor of Nicaea, Michael VIII Palaeologus. New political and social changes happened in 1334, when the Bishopric of Ohrid was included under the Serbian state of Stefan Dushan interrupting its traditional ties with Constantinople. It was conquered by the Ottomans in circa 1386 and the region remained under their rule for 526 years. Current national borders were redrawn in the aftermath of World War I by the Great Powers. This together with the militarization of borders during the communist regime in Albania, significantly diminished the historical cultural interactions between settlements around the lake. Even though this region is today divided between Albania, Greece and North Macedonia, it presents common points in terms of tangible and intangible heritage, which is coherent since, as mentioned in [2], the establishment of national borders dates back only to the 1926. The local populations in each of the three countries naturally include also minority communities from bordering countries.

Many sources refer to the Byzantine hermitages (cave churches) as the most outstanding cultural heritage elements of the region. Caved in steep and hardly accessible rocky shores, they are inseparable from the landscape. Together with archaeological sites, post byzantine churches and several examples of vernacular architecture from 18th – 19th and early 20th century, they compose the built heritage panorama of this region. Even in a reduced form due to shrinking population, traditional practices present since prehistory [3], such as fishing, agriculture, gardening and cattle, still survive in the area.

The natural and cultural richness of the region coexists with multiple territorial, social, and environmental problems. Isolation of the settlements, shrinking, migration and emigration of the population are some of the negative phenomena that Pustec Municipality and the region needs to cope. Cultural heritage assets seem to be dispersed across the territory as isolated points, reflecting the impact of the fragmentation of settlements.

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Literature review

Presence of human settlements in the region through history

Many sources such as [3], Bunguri et al [1] etc. attest to the richness of the Prespa region in terms of archaeological evidence that confirm the presence of human settlements since prehistory. The Lake has always been the dominant element to which human life and activity was dependent. The highest number of archaeological sites date back to the Roman times. The settlement choice remains constant throughout the historic periods from prehistory up to Roman times, experiencing a drop in the transition between Roman times to late antiquity. While in prehistoric periods hill tops were preferred for location of walled settlements while using the lowlands for agricultural exploitation, during the antiquity (Hellenistic and Roman times) the interest for settling was transferred extensively to the shores of the lake. These sources refer to the prosperity of the region in terms of settlements, which maintained direct and indirect links with neighboring or even more distant cultural horizons through a variety of productive activities. Even though palafitta settlements have been registered in eastern and northern shores of the Prespas, no palafitta-type-settlements have been registered in the Albanian side which Bunguri et al [1], explains by the presence of elevated relief where people can settle protected from the water.

Cave Churches (Hermitages)

Cave churches are one of the most interesting architectural developments in the history of Christian culture. Part rock, part built, part murals, they display outstanding skills of local master builders and artists. Numerous cave churches have

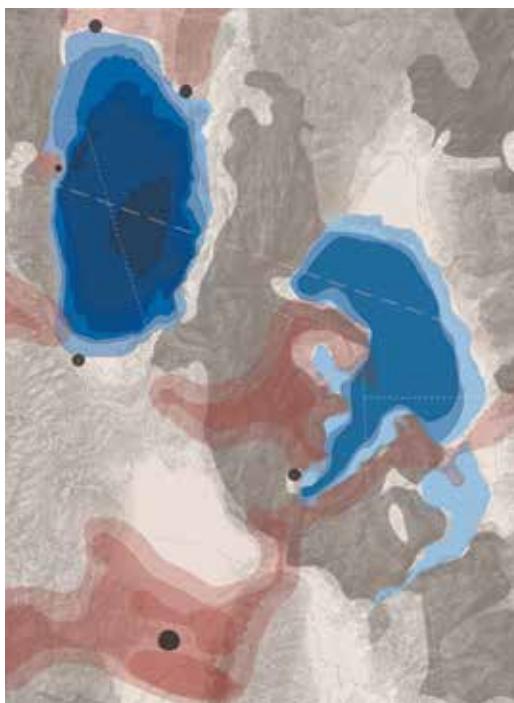


Fig. 2. Comparison of cultural heritage and geological formations in the Regional Level. Source/ Authors

220 appeared across the Mediterranean, from Southern Italy to France and Egypt. Six churches caved in steep rock formations have been registered on the shores around Prespa Lake. Based on diverse sources (Dhamo [4], Popa [5], Thomo [6], Xhaferaj et al [7], Bushi et al [8], these hermit foundations were built by local nobles. They are in fact a combination of a chapel and a very basic housing opportunity and were built to house hermit monks who retreated from society to be more in communion with God. Most of them have been built in the Middle Ages, although there are few that date originally back to the 9th century. During the 14th century, under the Bishopric of Ohrid, numerous nobles and monks helped in their painting, confirming the presence of byzantine art in this region. Often, these caves were unreachable, on steep rocky cliffs. When the Balkans came in the late Middle Ages under Ottoman rule and stayed so for five centuries, the cave churches continued to be used by hermits and played an important role for the continuity of the Christian religion in the region.

Being of mostly karstic formations, the region has an abundance of caves and rock shelters, however only one cave prehistoric settlement site and 6 cave churches have been registered, fact which is seen by Bunguri et al [1] as an outcome of the lack of research in this region. The monuments of Prespa are numerous but this research focuses mainly on those situated within Albanian territory, which have been included in the national list of monuments since 1971, but for many reasons, are the least well-known. Management Plan of Prespa National Park in Albania 2014-2024 as well as other studies and projects – have aimed at valorizing and integrating cultural heritage in the management concept and tourist development strategy.

Natural landscape as substratum of the built environment - Geoheritage Concept

[9] state that, in terms of Semperian Criticism, the built environment can be framed as *topos*, *typos* and *tekton*. "Topos refers to the place as the specific geographic, geomorphologic, and cultural context in which architecture is situated. *Typos*, means the type, as the recurring patterns, forms, or building archetypes that emerge over time

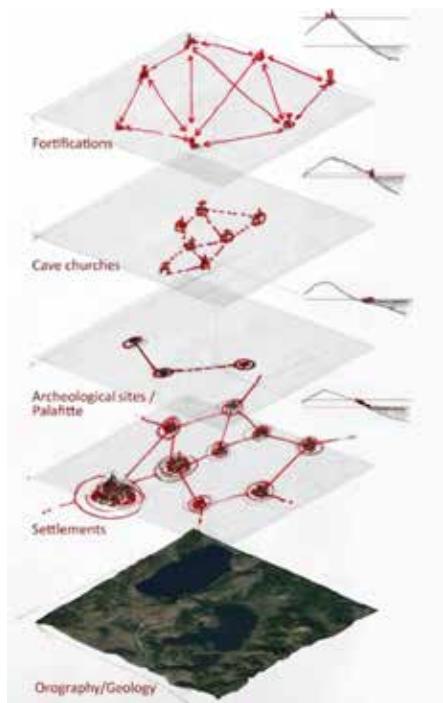


Fig. 3. Diagram showing different typologies of monuments in relation to the orography of the terrain. Source/ Authors

within architectural practice. *Tekton* denotes the builder or craft, referring to the technical and artistic processes of construction. [9, p. 11].

Considering the above, Frampton proposed that the future development of architecture should result from the continuity of the tectonic form, concept which he builds up largely focusing more on the technique, even though he considers all Semperian elements as contributors to it. In terms of this research, it is the *topos*, in terms of the physical and historical environment that emerges as a powerful and sustainable element influencing the built environment through history.

The PhD research group considered that the interrelation between geomorphology and human presence is very powerful in this area. It might be, by itself, an identifying and permanent element throughout history. Built heritage was investigated in its relationship with the natural landscape and with the geomorphology of the area, which, emerged not only as a substratum that conditioned human settlement and the resulting cultural heritage, but as a natural heritage itself. This consideration of the relation between geomorphology and built environment as a heritage in itself led to the exploration of literature sources on the concepts of Geoheritage concerned with the preservation of Earth Science features. [10] explain that the term "geological heritage" first appeared during the 1st International Symposium of the Conservation of Geological Heritage in Digne, France (1991). It led to the emergence of the concept of "Geoheritage" in the Malvern International Conference (1993). "Geoheritage encompasses features of geology, at all scales that are intrinsically important sites or culturally important sites offering information into the evolution of the Earth; or into the history of science, or that can be used for research, teaching, or reference".

Learning from vernacular architecture

The interest of architects in studying pre-modern cultural expressions and techniques started in the first decade after WWII. Within the broad name "learn from vernacular architecture", it included various views and denominations such as spontaneous architecture, or the most widely



Fig. 4. Typical relationship between geomorphology, lithology and heritage. Source/ Authors

known architecture without architects. These research paths, highlighting the study of the pre-modern architecture, were vividly promoted through powerful exhibitions, which are regarded by [11] as signs of the crisis of modernist authorship approach.

Here it is important to mention also [12] who launches a third typology in addition to two typologies of architecture, the one that promoted a natural basis for design and launched by Laugier, as well as the other that promoted the productive process and the machine as basis for design (Le Corbusier). In the Vidler's 3rd typology, the city is considered as a whole, its past and present revealed in its physical structure. It is in itself and on itself a new typology that need to be analysed and studied as basis for design.

Tools and methodology

"The way a manmade environment has been structured is linked until it is identified with the historical-construction process, which can be perceived in the formation of typology: this is the physical trace of human experience left behind in each cultural context and therefore living cultural material". [9, p. 11]

Considering the millennial interlinkage of natural and cultural heritage in the site, as well as acknowledging interdependence and interplay between different scales, the PhD research group used a holistic and multi-scale approach for the analysis. Such a holistic approach is also seen in the research work of Bunguri et al [1] where they propose an archaeology of the Prespas. Adding to that, the present research focuses on the spatial dimensions of the built heritage and interrelations between nature and culture while proposing a Historic Cultural Landscape of the Prespas. The research aims to analyze elements of different layers of heritage in different scales such as regional scale, settlement scale and architectural scale.

Objectives

Integration and coherence of the whole landscape of the lake, regardless of the national borders,

was the Leading Objective of the research. So our strategy as shown in Figure 1, is to reunify the heritage through the lake.

The secondary objectives inherent in cultural heritage are:

- i. Identification and enhancement of cultural monuments.
- ii. Revival of historic links and routes to improve accessibility of isolated monuments, and in particular cave churches.
- iii. Preservation of the vernacular architecture, preventing uncontrolled tourism development that may lead to its excessive transformations or even its demolition.
- iv. Stimulate the preservation and recovery of tradition and folklore.
- v. Keeping alive traditional practices such as agriculture, livestock and fishing, avoiding their transformation in an industrial sense by enhancing handicraft products.
- vi. Reverse the trend of depopulation.
- vii. Develop functional services for slow experiential tourism.

These secondary objectives align with the leading objective and aim at the sustainable development of the area aimed to encouraging residents to remain, support local activities and enhance them through potential contributions from the tourism sector.

Methodology

The research methodology involves a comprehensive analysis of the Prespa Lake region. As stated above, it seems essential, to adopt a holistic approach, taking into consideration the orographic, geomorphological, geological, climatic, settlement and cultural systems, in order to be able to understand its potentials and limitations [13]. This holistic approach comprises a multi-scale analysis of (1) identification of various typologies of cultural heritage as well as (2) analysis of interrelations between natural and cultural heritage and practices.

1. The identification of cultural heritage assets in the region aimed at grouping them in terms of genre (fortifications, rock cave churches, Neolithic settlements etc...).

2. Special attention was given to the interrelation of historic values of the landscape and its natural beauty, thus defining geological outcrops, caves, submarine karst cavities, hydrology and natural landscape as geoheritage [14]. The relationship between cultural heritage with the geoheritage and the cultural practices guided a closer reading of monuments. Identified groups of monuments were typologically classified according to their geometry, geomorphological location and building materials.

Analysis

The multi-analysis includes three different scales, namely the Regional Scale, the Settlement Scale and the Architectural Scale each leading to specific proposals.

Regional Scale

The Regional scale takes into consideration the area of the three lakes, namely Ohrid lake, Great Prespa and Lesser Prespa lakes, (see Figure 2). Our decision to analyse this region as a whole, comes from the fact that cultural heritage is strongly influenced by the natural landscape and the three lakes constitute one strong natural system in this respect.

A comparison of the geology and the cultural heritage, developed in this level, resulted in a series of patches rather than point elements. The basin is divided geologically in two distinct parts: the Southwestern is characterized by limestones and dolomites, and the northeastern is dominated by granites and gneiss. This division determines the distinctive types of vegetation on each side. (Figure 2).

The diagram in Figure 3, shows how cultural heritage differ according to the orography of the terrain. In fact, starting from the lower level, that is the lake, different layers of cultural heritage can be identified in different elevations, namely the pile dwellings, the cave churches, the settlements, the village churches, and finally the fortifications. The geological and morphological conformation has strongly influenced the development of the Ohrid and Prespa region. On one hand, the presence of mountains around the lake naturally limited contact with the outside world, making obvious the isolation and seclusion of the region. This led to the development of its own distinct socio-cultural character and was an attraction for hermit religious practices in medieval times. On the other hand, the development of the settlements was conditioned not only by orography but also by geological conformation, which in the framework of this research is referred to as geoheritage. The materials found in the region also conditioned building techniques, related to stone wall textures, where readily available, or to earthen (adobe) construction in the flat clay areas [15]. Figure 4 shows the mutual



Fig. 5. Geology and sections. Source/ Authors

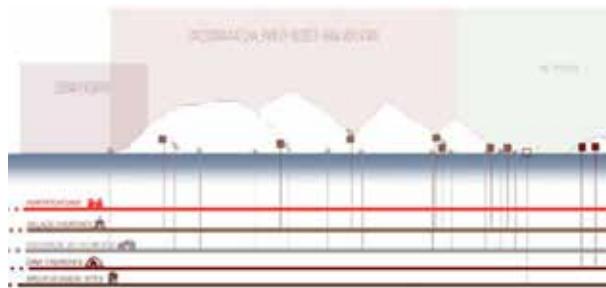


Fig. 7. Prespa Lake panorama. Source/ Authors

relationship between these aspects.

Settlement Scale

region also conditioned building techniques, related to stone wall textures, where readily available, or to Settlement scale analysis focused on the area of Great Prespa Lake alone, overlooked by the Municipality of Pustec. The geology layer analysed at this scale, as seen in Figure 5, is complemented with environmental sections that interrelate the main villages and monuments, thus to offer a reading of typical cultural heritage locations.

In Figure 6, we wanted to represent the lakeside in its entirety enabling a quick vision of the reciprocal relationship between monuments and the geography of the territory. This panorama led us to the strategy explained in Section 3.1. It also inspired us to see the lake as key element connecting the land and the monuments. Figure 7 shows the distribution in plan of main typologies of monuments, namely cave churches, village churches, archaeological sites, fortifications and natural parks.

Architectural Scale

The analysis undertaken in the architectural scale, focuses in two macro divisions of cultural heritage: single and diffuse heritage monuments. The first case includes single monuments of declared

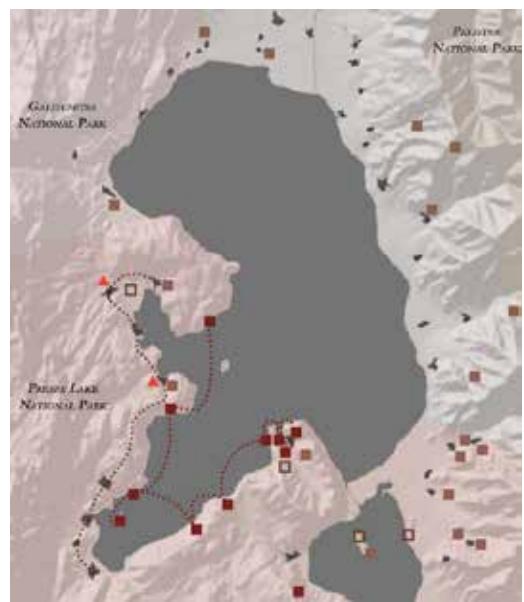
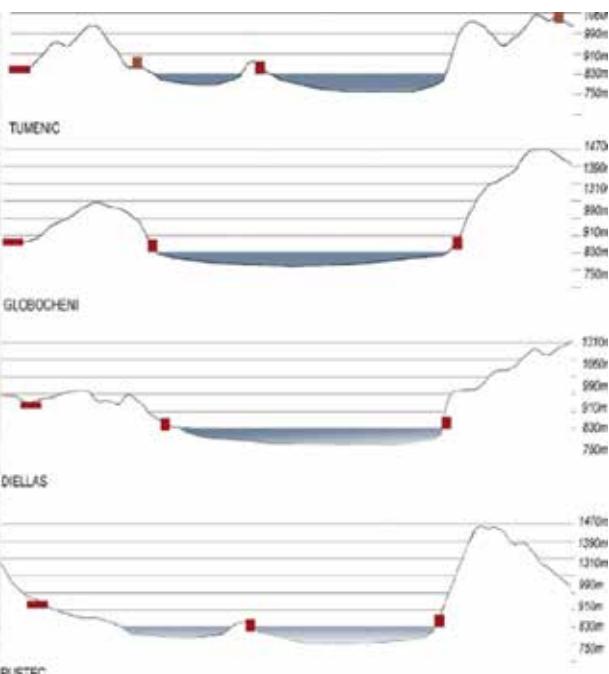
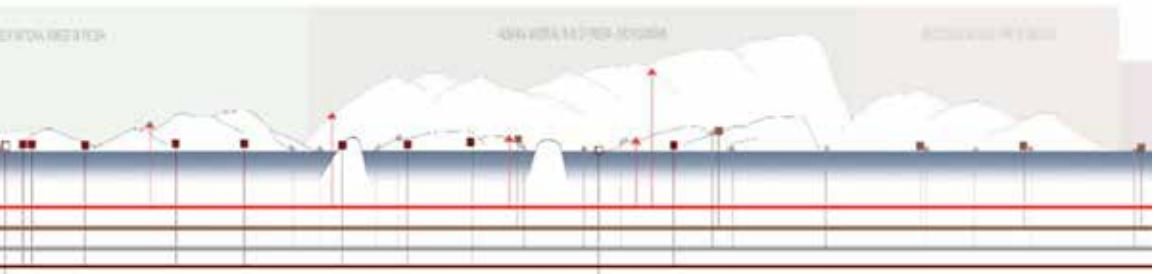


Fig. 6. Distribution of cultural monuments in plan - Settlement scale. Source/ Authors



national interest, (such as cave churches etc.) administered by regional or local authorities. It also includes specific areas of declared interest such as natural/geological monuments, managed by national or transnational authorities.

More challenging was the classification and conservation of diffuse heritage, which was divided into tangible and intangible culture. The tangible culture includes local vernacular houses which reflect Balkan 18th- 19th-century architecture. In most cases they feature (local granite or limestone) stone masonry with visible horizontal timber ties. The walls of the upper storeys with lighter internal partitions, with a timber-frame structure covered by lath or reed and plaster or filled with adobe bricks. In early 20th century buildings, stone walls contain a hidden timber frame, revealed by characteristic metal ties at the corners of the building. For buildings of the same period in the plains, the basic construction material are adobe bricks. The 19th-century houses display an extroverted rural character, while the houses of the early 20th century exhibit a more introverted, urban character. The classification of the vernacular heritage based on building materials used is shown in Figure 9.

Intangible cultural practices are seen to exist in close relation to geoheritage and the conformation of the area. Figure 9 shows also a reading of the presence of traditional practices linked (1) to the

lake (fishing), (2) to the land (agriculture, livestock farming, timber harvesting), (3) to the caves (artistic presence in relation to the churches quarries), and (4) the seclusion of the region conditioned by the mountainous reliefs (permanence of traditional customs and traditions).

Conclusions and recommendations

It is essential to note that despite the ancient history of the entire Prespa Lake region, its timeline remains uninterrupted. The lake itself is not merely a monument but a thriving settlement that continues to evolve, therefore, its culture is not just an artifact but an active entity that must be nurtured. The tangible and intangible heritage of the region is deeply intertwined with the natural environment and geoheritage. Despite its historical richness and diversity, cultural heritage remains fragmented, isolated from the local community, and at times lacks maintenance and valorization. Based on the Regional Scale analysis, the area around Prespa Lake being geologically oldest, corresponds to the area that hosts some of the oldest cultural heritage, including prehistoric settlements such as fortifications in the Prespas and the palafitta-settlements including the inner land (Maliq area) and in and around lake Ohrid.

According to our strategy, each of architectural and built heritage key elements should not be viewed in

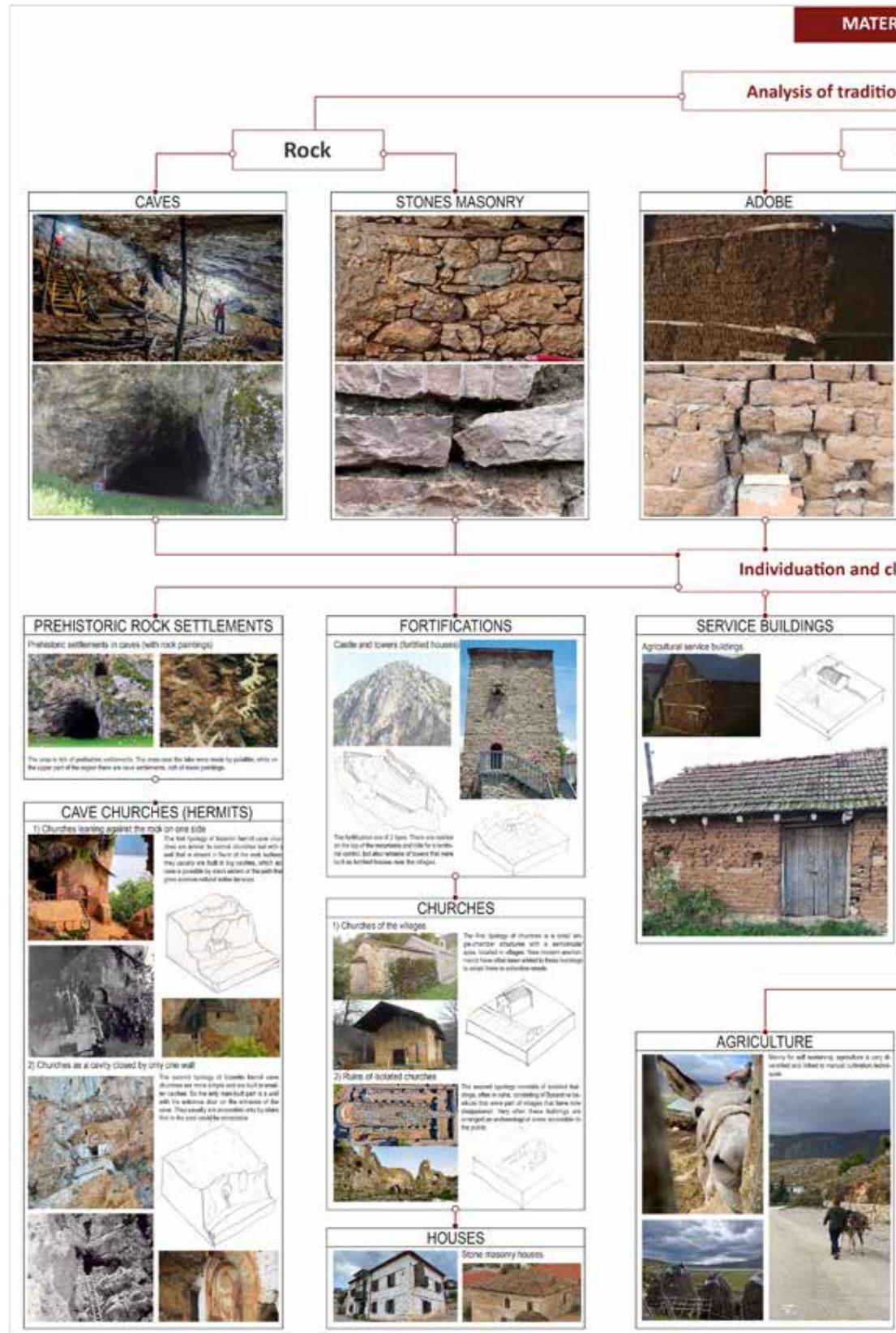


Fig. 8. Material and typological analysis. Source/ Authors

LOCAL CULTURE

Local constructive materials

Clay

BRICKS



Wood

TIMBER STRUCTURE



MIX STRUCTURE



Classification of typologies

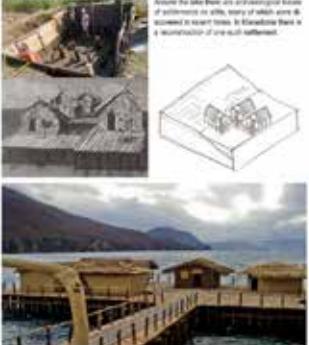
CHURCHES

Bricks used in special part of the walls (arches, capitals, plinths).



PALAFITTE

Prefabricic Lake settlements (galeries)



HOUSES

Buildings with wooden parts for functional and structural purposes



IMMATERIAL CULTURE

FISHING

The idea is that of fish, especially cod, trout and other lake fishes. The activity is performed with small boats individually.



FARMING

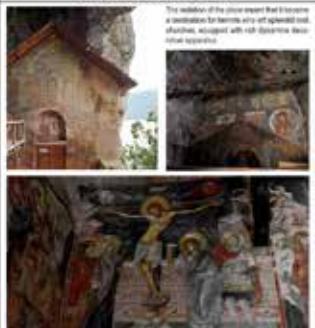
Farming for domestic use is very common, especially for growing wheat, goat and sheep.



TRADITIONS



ART AND RELIGION



Cultural

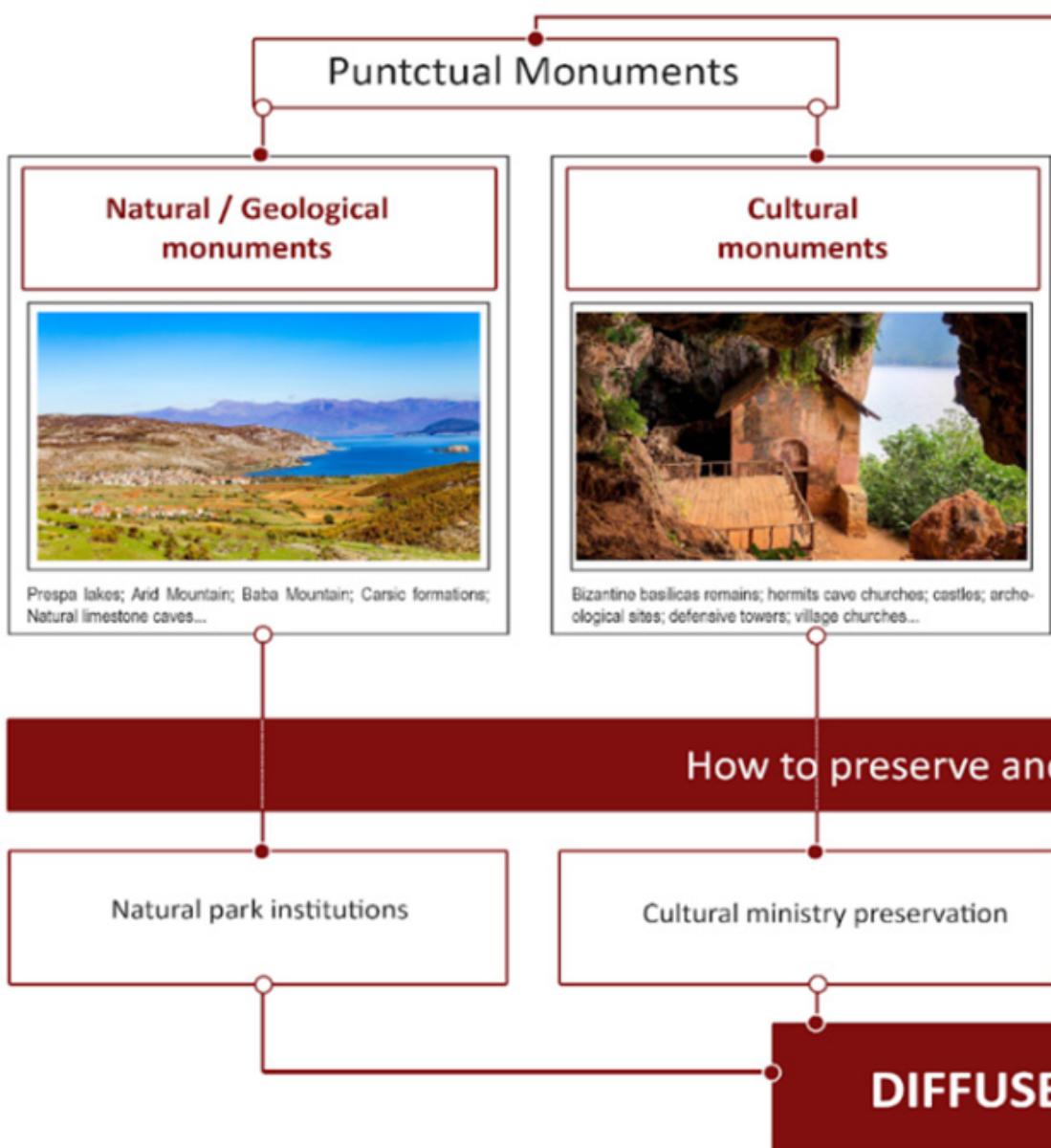


Fig. 9. Diffuse Museum Idea. Source/ Authors

Heritage

Diffuse Heritage

Material culture



Historic baic buildings, vernacular buildings, typical typologies and constructive techniques...

Immaterial culture



Traditional activities; local traditions, dances, habits; ethnographic and anthropological heritage...

valorize the heritage?

Tipological catalogation of the town centers buildings and indications for the recovery

Local demo-etno-antropological museums / traditional festival support / cultural centers

MUSEUM

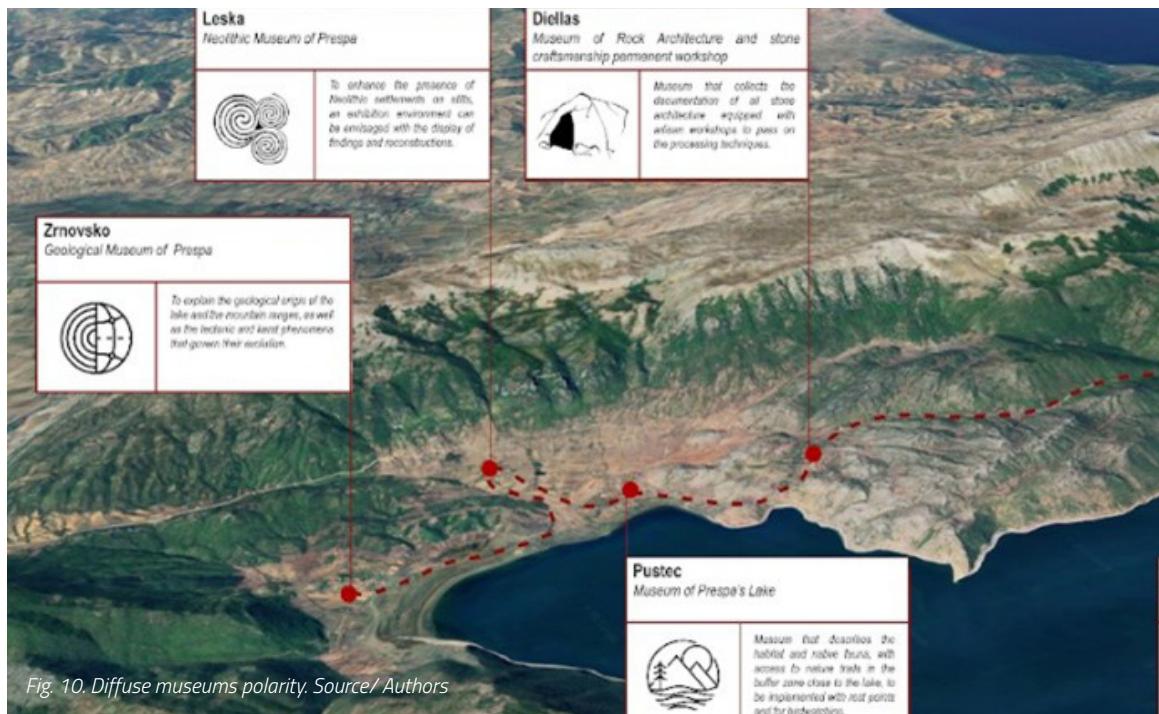


Fig. 10. Diffuse museums polarity. Source/ Authors

isolation but as interconnected parts of a system. The proposed interventions aim to achieve two primary objectives: firstly, to promote experiential tourism by linking emerging cultural sites through small-scale networks and establishing new museum systems to reinforce local identity; secondly, to safeguard tangible and intangible heritage by preserving the typological features of historic vernacular buildings and promoting cultural centers that sustain local traditions and festivals. As concluded in the Settlement Scale Analysis, local settlements can easily create interconnections with each other, yet their individual identities are not easily perceived. Our proposal at this scale is to connect these towns not only with each other but also with the monuments that are part of the landscape, often isolated. This can be achieved through the concept of a diffuse museum, serving as an acupuncture strategy to extract and emphasize the unique identity and culture of each village while enhancing accessibility to heritage monuments. The concept of a diffuse museum encompasses all aspects of heritage. Cultural heritage should be part of an itinerary that starts from the lake, passes through cave churches, and extends into the surrounding land, connecting villages where the diffuse museum concept will operate, as illustrated in Figure 9.

In the architectural scale, there exists a parallelism between the lake and its monuments. The natural caves are not cultural monuments in themselves, but cultural sites created by human activities such as building and mural painting. Persistent human activity serves as a link between geology and archaeology. To sustain this dynamic landscape, continuous activity is crucial. Thus, we propose first that these monuments and museums could serve as points where artists from various countries can

meet and engage in creative processes amidst the natural landscape. It would serve as connection to the spirit of Byzantine painters and hermits who once used these spaces for meditation and creation, ensuring the continuity of this cultural heritage. This second type of the proposed interventions, concern the enhancement of the local characteristics of each settlement and monument, and involves, the creation of museums and cultural centers, in the local villages (See Figure 10). It further involves creating clusters that unite the various emergencies with each other.

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