



DA Dipartimento
Architettura
Ferrara

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

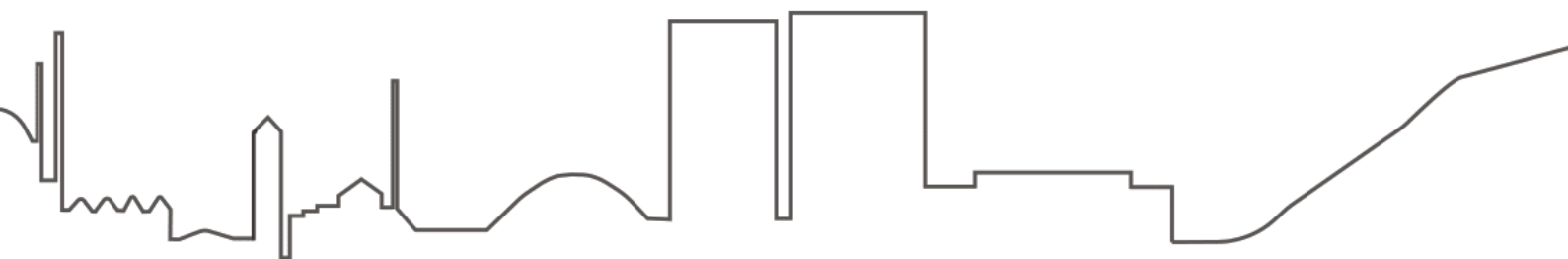
2nd INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HOUSING,
PLANNING, AND RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE
TERRITORY

TOWARDS EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVES

OCTOBER 16th-17th, 2025

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2nd International Conference on Housing, Planning, and Resilient Development of the Territory

Towards Euro-Mediterranean Perspectives

Conference Theme and Rationale

This conference returned for the second time within the Albanian and Mediterranean academic context, aiming to build a tradition of collaboration centered on scientific research and academia. Following the success of the first edition held on October 13th-14th, 2023, where proceedings were published in the Book of Proceedings, Albanica journal, and various international academic platforms, POLIS University and the Academy of Sciences of Albania relaunched this important event. The 2025 edition focused on housing, urban planning, and resilient territorial development, offering a platform for researchers, policymakers, and experts from the region and beyond.

Albania and the Western Balkans have faced major transformations in urbanization, spatial planning, and environmental management. Demographic changes, economic pressures, and environmental challenges created a need for new strategies in architecture, planning, and governance. This conference brought together diverse voices to explore these themes and promote resilient and sustainable development.

Key topics included architecture and the city, with emphasis on urban form, housing typologies, and the role of cultural heritage in modern urban design; urban mobility, addressing traffic challenges, public transport, and the use of technologies like GIS and AI in planning; and new housing models, focusing on affordability, energy efficiency, and innovative materials.

Discussions also covered demography and economy, exploring territorial governance, smart cities, social enterprises, and digital technologies such as AI, VR, and the Metaverse in urban management. Finally, the urban and natural environment was addressed through topics like pollution, adaptive planning, and nature-based solutions for climate resilience.

Through this conference, POLIS University and the Academy of Sciences of Albania aimed to foster a broad interdisciplinary debate on these pressing issues, combining academic and practical perspectives to offer concrete recommendations for future urban and territorial development policies and projects.

Organizers' Announcement

The International Scientific Conference on Housing, Urban Planning, and Resilient Territorial Development: Toward Euro-Mediterranean Approaches was held on October 16th-17th, 2025, in Tirana, Albania. Organized by POLIS University in collaboration with the Academy of Sciences of Albania and supported by national and international partners, including the University of Ferrara and Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, the event brought together researchers, academics, policymakers, and professionals to address key challenges in urban development, with a focus on resilience and sustainability in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The first day of the conference took place at the Academy of Sciences, while the second day was hosted at POLIS University.

The conference explored five main themes:

- I. Architecture and the City, which investigated the typological and morphological dimensions of urban form, the evolution of collective and individual housing types, the relationship between architectural design and urban identity, and the role of historical and cultural heritage in shaping contemporary cities;
- II. Urban Mobility and Resilient Cities, which addressed traffic congestion, infrastructure challenges, and public transportation, while also promoting the redesign of public spaces – such as streets, squares, and pedestrian zones – to improve accessibility and mobility; it also explored the integration of digital technologies like GIS, AI, and simulation tools to enhance planning, automation, and infrastructure management;
- III. New Housing Models, which examined innovative approaches to affordable and social housing in response to demographic shifts and technological change, along with energy efficiency strategies, passive energy systems, and the application of new sustainable materials and construction technologies;
- IV. Demography and Economy, which focused on macro-regional and national dynamics impacting territorial development, including urban governance, disaster risk reduction, and the rise of smart and inclusive cities; it also explored how emerging technologies – such as AI, VR, and the Metaverse – along with social enterprises and circular economy practices, could foster more equitable and adaptive urban systems; and
- V. Urban and Natural Environment, which analyzed environmental degradation in urban settings, including air, water, and soil pollution, and promoted nature-based solutions, ecosystem-based planning, and adaptive strategies to enhance environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

The conference was conducted in English and Albanian (with self-translated texts where applicable) and was free of charge, with all registration fees fully covered by POLIS University in support of open academic exchange. Key deadlines included abstract submission by June 15th, acceptance notification by June 30th, first draft of papers by September 15th, and final submissions by October 31st.

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V. Urban and Natural Environment: Environmental Problems, Climate Issues and Other Environmental Challenges

Sustainability and resilience in the natural environment / Adaptive planning / Complexity in territorial development.

Air, water, and soil pollution / Ecosystem services for protected and urban areas / Strategic environmental assessments / Nature-based solutions / Urban biodiversity assessment.

Decentralization of Tourism – An Inter-Regional Approach

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between cultural heritage and urban development in the Tirana region, focusing on historical fortifications, ancient trails, human habitats and their surrounding landscapes. It aims to reassess how Albania's rich historical environment "from Antiquity and the Byzantine era to the Ottoman period" have been affected by contemporary urbanization and shifting socio-economic dynamics. Using spatial analysis and on-site documentation, the study examines key heritage sites, including the castles of Ndroq, Petrelë, Krujë and others, evaluating their historical evolution, geographical significance and environmental context.

The findings highlight the potential of these sites to serve as catalysts for community regeneration and balanced regional development, particularly through the promotion of cultural and eco-tourism, as well as improved digital accessibility. The research proposes a decentralized tourism model that integrates cultural preservation with recreational and sustainable economic uses. By merging historical analysis with urban and tourism planning, it advocates for a multi-scalar policy framework that embeds cultural heritage into broader socio-economic strategies, guiding Tirana toward a more inclusive, sustainable and culturally aware development path.

Keywords

Decentralization, fortifications, heritage, hinterland, spatial planning, sustainability, tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism development in Albania began in the early 19th century, when renowned travelers such as Evliya Çelebiu, Lord Byron and Edith Durham visited the country and left behind detailed accounts of Albanian landscapes and the daily life of an Albanian. A notable peak in tourism activity occurred between 1928 and 1930 (AIDA, 2022, p.4).

However, the freedom to travel and explore the lands of Albanian significantly changed during the communist regime beginning in 1945 and ending 1991. Access to tourism was extremely limited and tightly controlled, foreign visitors faced strict border inspections. Following the 1990s, Albania underwent a profound period of political and economic transition. When the democracy of Albanian was further established Tourism was not integrated into the core of the society as they had long lived without focus on the touristic market. The focus was to open towards the international markets and western society.

Tirana began to Urbanize rapidly without control which has caused challenges such as overcrowding in the city center and the degradation of natural spaces within it. Now more than a decade after a territorial administrative reform in Albania, its full implications are still unfolding across local governance. This reform fundamentally redefined the responsibilities of municipalities, transitioning them from managing only urban cores to overseeing large, complex territory with no knowledge on maintaining such landscape. Despite this territorial growth, a cohesive and sustainable strategy for the development of these incorporated areas has yet to materialize. The current focus remains disproportionately centered on the Capital City.

Unfortunately, the absence of comprehensive and in-depth studies on these historical areas limits the ability to design evidence-based development policies. Existing research is often fragmented and inconsistent, particularly regarding the dating of these structures and whether other associated elements have been lost over time due to natural erosion, earthquakes, urbanization or socio-natural phenomena (Baçe 2021, p.16).

However, unlike much of Europe, where urban and industrial expansion altered the landscape (Wallace, 2024), many Albanian regions have retained their authenticity through strong ties to nature and traditional spatial organization. Notably, these are the same territories where major historical figures such as Julius Caesar during his campaign against Pompey (Karaiskaj, 1981, p. 82-83), Emperor Augustus and Alexander the Great's battles with Illyrian Kings Clitus and Glauk (Bace, 2021, p.18), later followed by Ottoman rule.

The Illyrian's deep understanding of their territory showcases their advanced spatial planning abilities before such concepts existed.

Surrounding Tirana's landscapes ancient fortifications remain presenting a unique opportunity for promoting urban decentralization and the creation of recreational spaces. Such integration can help alleviate urban stress, foster ecological balance and contribute to sustainable development of cultural and natural tourism while also respecting their historical significance and meeting modern needs.

In recent decades, tourism has emerged as one of the most important sectors for Albania's economic growth and cultural promotion. However, the current pattern of tourism development has led to significant territorial imbalances, and unsustainable incomes for the locals. A closer analysis of the

spatial distribution of tourist attractions and visitor flows reveals a troubling phenomenon: the excessive centralization of tourism in urban centers particularly in the capital city of Tirana. While the cultural and natural assets of the peripheral regions remain neglected.

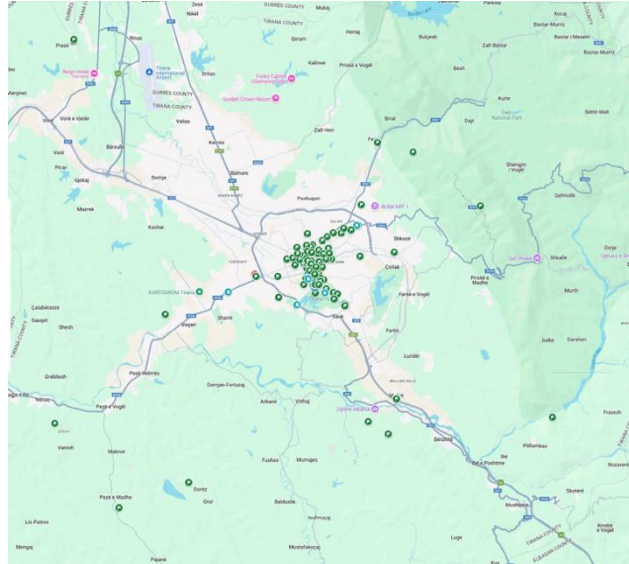


Figure 1. Spatial Analysis of Concentration of Tourist Attractions centralized in Tirana City.

Source: Bashkia Tiranë.

The goal of this research is to identify non-urban areas with potential for sustainable tourism development to alleviate pressure on the city and create economic flow.

2. Methodology

Table 1 shows the research methodology used structured in three phases. They addressed a specific research question using qualitative and spatial analysis tools.

No.	Objective	Research Question	Methods/Instruments
1	Exploration and identification of territorial itineraries.	How are these itineraries developed across the territory?	Field observation, Photography, Mental Maps
2	Reading and analysis of historical itineraries	What are the types and typologies of historical itineraries?	Historical/ archival maps, Documents, GIS, CAD, Photoshop, Matrix analysis
3	Interpretation of historical itineraries through planning instruments.	How can historical itineraries be related to contemporary settlements?	Local General Plans, Tourism Strategies, Gaps analysis.

Table 1. Objectives, research questions and methodology.

Developing on the table the main data and information collected and interpreted are as follows.

3. Literature review

- Exploration of historical texts, archaeological studies and existing literature related to the antique heritage of Albania.
- Analysis of urban decentralization theories and successful case studies of cultural heritage integration in urban planning.

Case studies

- Examination of selected examples for their historical and strategic relevance.
- Analysis of global best practices in literary and cultural tourism, with a focus on the Mediterranean region.

Field visits

- Conducting on site visits to all accessible castles and Fortification in the Tirana region to document current conditions and assess the potential for integration.
- Engaging with a target group, including historians, urban planners and tourism professionals to gather qualitative insights.

Data analysis

- Utilizing publicly available cartographic data to visualize and understand the spatial relationship between historical areas and urban development.
- Reviewing tourism data to identify opportunities for literary tourism and potential target markets.

4. Results

What immediately stands out when visiting these locations is the remarkable visibility and strategic positioning they offer. Most of these fortifications are built atop hills or on elevated terrains, providing panoramic views of the surrounding landscapes, especially the western lowland and urban areas. From many of these vantage points, one can visually trace a network of fortifications that seem to communicate with each other across the horizon. The pathways leading to and from these sites, though eroded and overgrown forestation still bear the indentations of centuries of use, evoking a strong sense of continuity with the past. The physical sensation of standing on these historic grounds is deeply powerful. The natural elevation, isolation and commanding views from these points highlight the strategic military thinking of those who constructed them. Their positioning not only offered protection and control over movement but also established a symbolic presence in the territory. Architecturally, these fortifications reveal a distinct and purposeful design approach, adapted to the terrain and built with locally sourced materials. The construction methods and layout reflect the technological and defensive knowledge of their respective periods, often with walls adapted to the topography and visibility over key access routes.

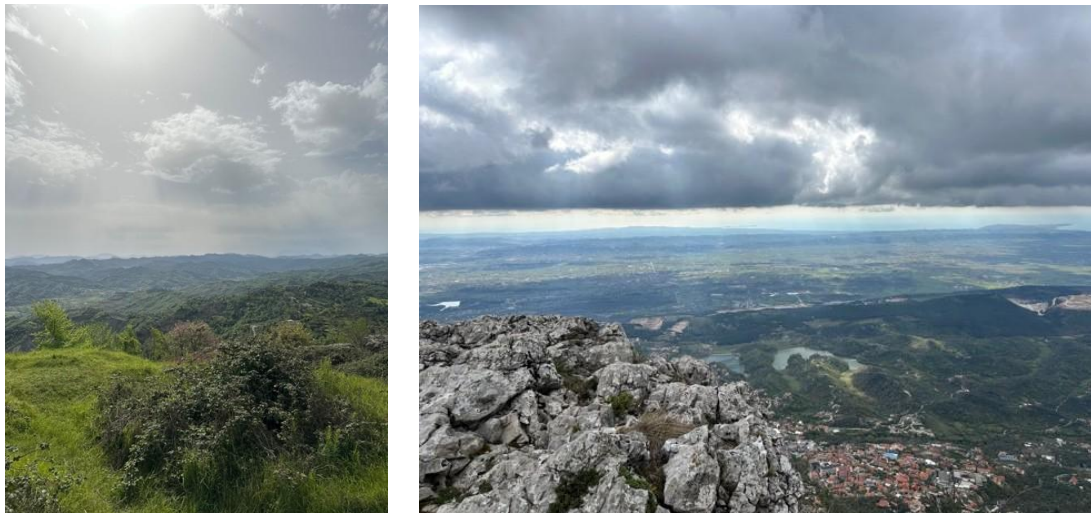


Figure 2, 3. *View from the Castle of Varoshi hilltop; Panorama view at Sarisalltik Peak; showcasing the hinterlands of Tiranë.*

The map of Figure 4 is a Spatial Analysis of the Cultural and Natural Landscapes of the area surrounding Tirana. This analysis examines the spatial distribution, interactions and relationships between cultural and natural features within a defined territory. It integrates geographic, ecological and socio-cultural data to identify how natural elements such as topography, hydrology and natural assets interact with cultural layers like fortifications, heritage sites, land use patterns and infrastructure. By applying GIS tools and spatial methodologies, the analysis highlights areas of ecological and cultural significance as well as detecting pressures between human activity and the environment.

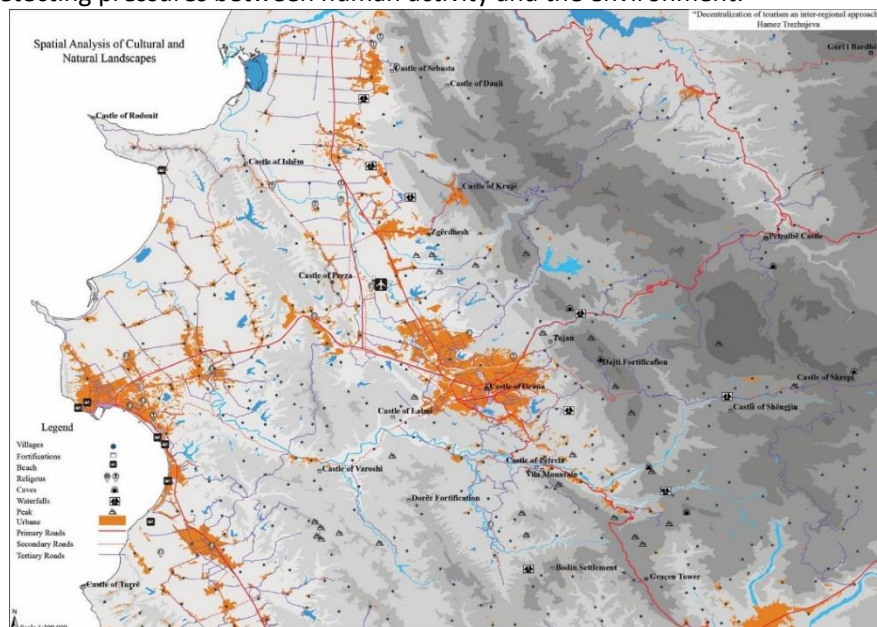


Figure 4. *Spatial analysis of cultural and natural landscapes map.*

Figure 5 shows a Catalog of Itineraries. Building upon the insights from the spatial analysis, the catalog of itineraries translates identified cultural and natural assets into curated visitor experiences. Each itinerary connects significant sites and landscapes into coherent routes, guided by themes such as

heritage, gastronomy, eco-tourism or recreation. Through mapping descriptive content and spatial planning, the catalog presents routes with details on accessibility, duration and thematic focus, ensuring both visitor engagement and landscape protection. By linking analysis with practice, the catalog not only promotes cultural and natural heritage but also supports sustainable tourism strategies that respect ecological balance, reinforce local identity and regenerate the community and income.

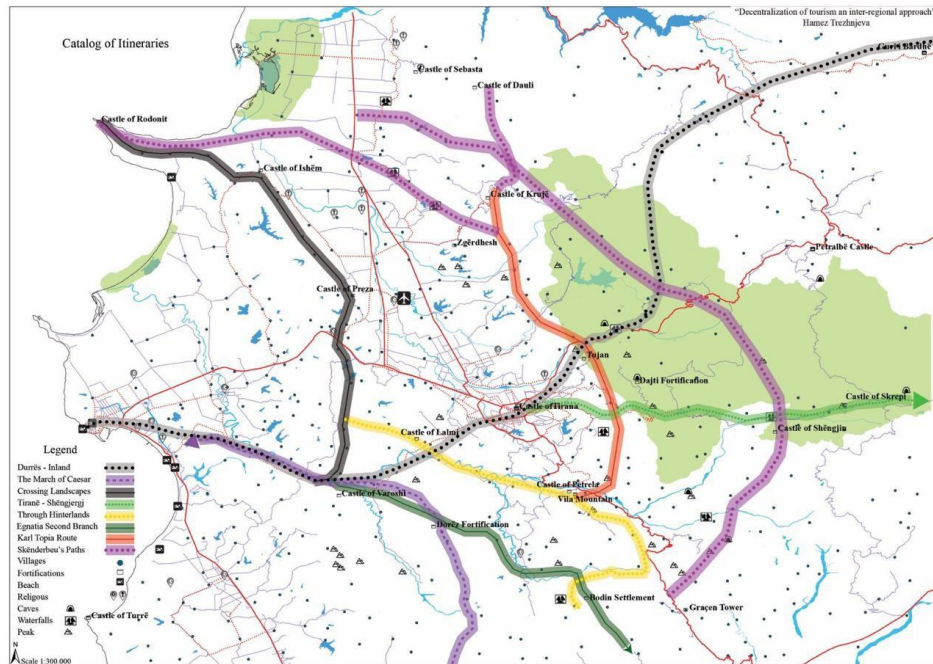


Figure 5. *Catalog of itineraries map.*

5. Discussion

Despite the heritage sites historical and cultural importance, the sites face significant challenges. A major issue observed during my field visits is the lack of maintenance and management. Trash, vegetation, forestation, urbanization, thorny plants and invasive species, have overtaken many of the structures. In several cases, the remains are barely visible beneath layers of overgrowth, making it difficult to understand or appreciate the archaeological significance. At sites like Zgërdhesh, Tujan and Persqop where recent excavations are continuing, they lack any kind of informative signage. Visitors and researchers alike are left with no context or explanation for what is being uncovered or studied.



Figure 6. *Trash left around signage at Petrela Castle a frequented tourist destination.*

Accessibility is another pressing concern. While these fortifications are often popular among hiking enthusiasts, the routes leading to them are typically unmarked and difficult to navigate. The absence of clear trails, directional signage, or visitor infrastructure adds an additional layer of difficulty especially for those unfamiliar with the terrain. This not only limits public engagement with these heritage sites but also poses a risk to their preservation, as unmanaged access can lead to accidental damage.

While the fortifications of the Tirana region offer exceptional insights into the historical landscapes and strategic thinking of earlier societies, their current state raises urgent questions about heritage preservation and public accessibility. There is a clear need for integrated management plans that combine conservation, interpretation and sustainable tourism practices to protect and promote these valuable cultural assets.



Figure 7. *Overgrowth on the path to the Castle of Sebaste.*

One of the most pressing concerns is the apparent silence from the generation of scholars who unearthed and documented these fortifications. Despite their critical role in bringing these sites to light, their findings and interpretations are rarely made accessible to the wider public, nor are they actively updated or debated in contemporary academic platforms. This absence of dialogue not only narrows the academic field but also hinders new interpretations or comparative analyses that might arise from multidisciplinary perspectives

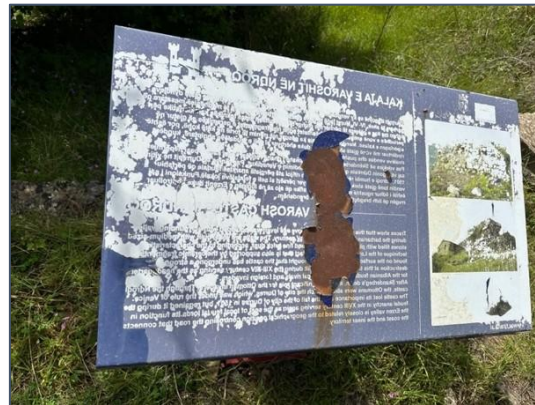


Figure 8. *Wear of signage due to weather on signage at Castle of Varoshi.*

Furthermore, this academic silence has contributed to a larger cultural invisibility of the topic. Fortifications are rarely discussed in popular media or educational settings, and their significance is largely absent from every day public discourse. One would expect such powerful symbols of identity, resistance and continuity to hold a more prominent place in national narratives. However, in practice, they are frequently overlooked in favor of more conventional heritage symbols. As a result, their symbolism and cultural weight are not fully understood or internalized by society. The fortifications sit in the backdrop not utilized as a mean for the economy and growth that Albania desperately needs.

The legal framework of tourism also needs to be addressed as lacks clear, enforceable standards for the construction and operation. Although it defines stimulated activities to include facilities such as hotels, marinas and cultural centers, the absence of specific guidelines regarding design quality, environmental impact and service standards has resulted in inconsistent and often subpar development. The discretionary power to expand these categories without a strategic framework increased the risk of uncoordinated growth, undermining sustainable tourism objectives (7665, article 3). and insufficient protection of cultural and natural heritage; Without clear protective measures, tourism development damages the cultural and ecological values of the areas, threatening both identity and biodiversity (7665, article 7).

6. Conclusion

Even when these sites are located, they often suffer from structural degradation. Many fortifications including towers, walls, cisterns and churches show signs of neglect, collapse risk and biological overgrowth. Some projects aimed at restoration and conservation are either delayed or incompletely executed, leaving key monuments vulnerable. Others lack even basic on-site infrastructure, Informational signage, interpretation panels and visitor pathways are largely missing, making self-guided or educational tourism nearly impossible.

Future research in this area would need to start with Classification and Identification. The castles and Fortifications need to be professional evaluated for archeological data, precise mapping with perimeters, current conditions, access, and tourism readiness. Legal framework would also need to be addressed territorial planning laws would need be updated to include specific measures for peripheral sites.

It's essential to have a more inclusive and territorial approach to the development of Cultural tourism in Albania and this situation presents a critical opportunity. By addressing these interconnected problems through a decentralized, inter-regional tourism approach, Albania can both preserve its cultural assets and activate them as engines of local development rather than concentrating all tourism in urban centers. The catalog of Itineraries in Figure 5 would reconnect fragmented historical landscapes, strengthen regional identities and distribute economic benefits more equitably. Enhancing digital mapping, harmonizing place names, investing in infrastructure, conservation and promoting heritage trails are essential steps toward a more inclusive and resilient model of tourism, one that values cultural continuity as much as economic growth.

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