

Conference

Chameria Issue: International Perspectives and Insights for a Peaceful Resolution

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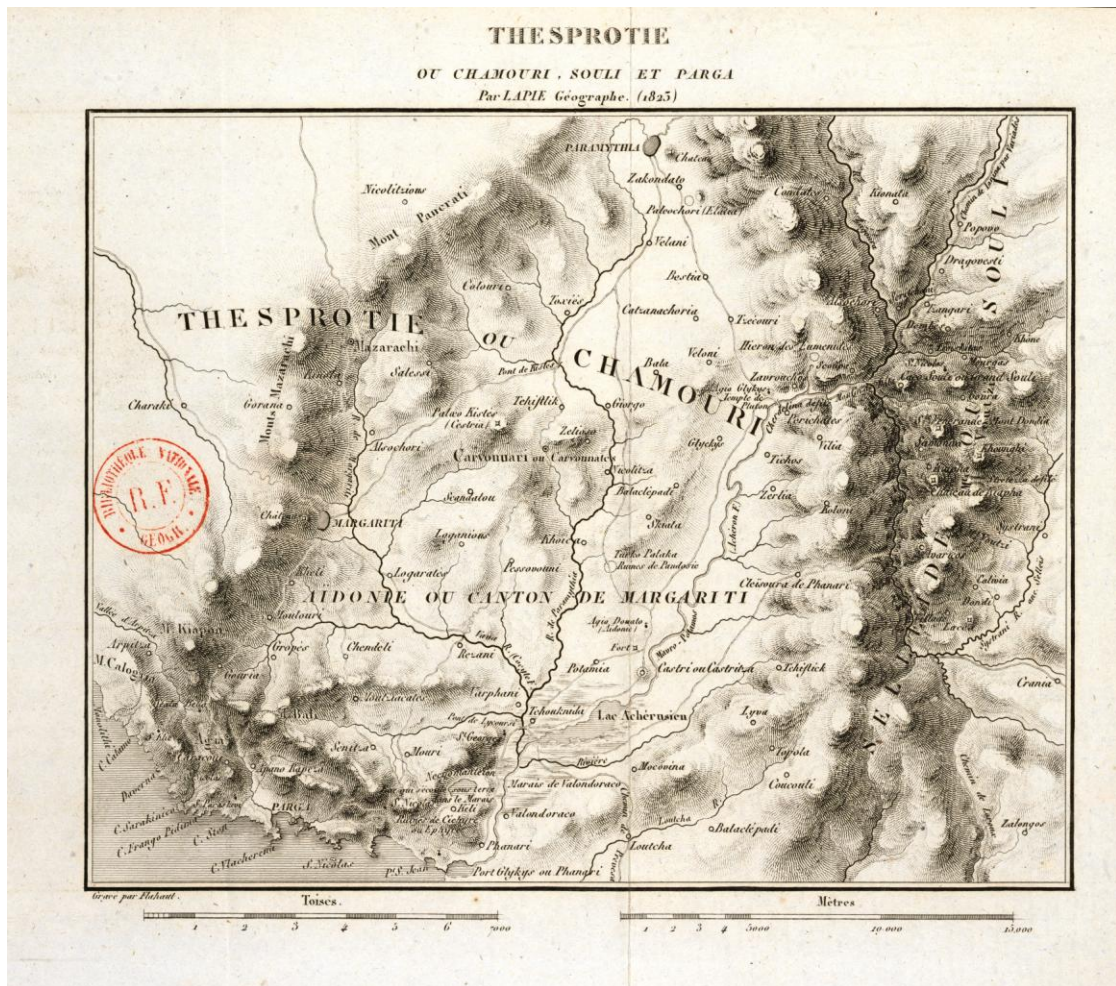
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'CHAMERIA HISTORY - GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE AND ALBANIAN TIME'

'For more than two centuries, the Ottoman Empire, once so formidable was gradually sinking into a state of decrepitude. Unsuccessful wars, and, in a still greater degree, misgovernment and internal commotions were the causes of its decline.'

- *Richard Alfred Davenport, 'The Life of Ali Pasha Tepelena, Vizier of Epirus'*.



On the wall in front of us is a map of north-west Greece that was made by a French military geographer, Lapie, and published in Paris in 1821, although it was probably in use in the French navy for some years before that. Lapie was at the forefront of technical innovation in cartography in his time, and had studied in Switzerland, the most advanced country for cartographic science in the late eighteenth century. It is likely that it was made for military use in the Napoleonic period wars against the British. Its very existence is a product of British-French national rivalry in the Adriatic in that period. Modern cartography had many of its roots in the Napoleonic Wars period and immediately before in the Eastern Mediterranean, when intense naval competition between the British and French for control of these waters led to major scientific advances. In turn, in the eighteenth century, similar progress had been made in both countries as a result of earlier wars in the Atlantic.

This map is titled 'Chameria/Thesprotia', and so at that time it is clear that the two traditional names for the region, Albanian and Greek, were both in common use then, not only locally but by the often classically-educated officers of a European Great Power. Yet a glance at the development of mid- nineteenth century cartography shows us that as little as twenty years later, after the time of Ali Pasha as ruler of the region, this joint terminology had disappeared and in the increasing British monopoly of regional power the Greek terms 'Epirus' and 'Thesprotia' always predominate, usually exclusively. These maps, French or British, were of course, a very considerable step forward from their Venetian Empire predecessors, in that however schematically, they did begin to try to make scientific geographical descriptions of the mainland interior; most Venetian maps except of important trading centres like Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik) only alluded to places within ten or twenty miles of the coastal littoral, at most.

The great majority of this material is in the form of Admiralty charts, made for the Royal Navy. Geography can often fade into historical enquiry and names on maps are often very important, or even, spelling of the same name, as Kosova/Kosovo demonstrates as an issue between Albanians and Serbs, or in a different context, the current 'name' controversy between Greece and Former Yugoslav Macedonia. The colonial powers of Western Europe were not only engaged in warfare and economic rivalry, they were also helping construct the national identities of the new states that were beginning to emerge from the Ottoman Empire. Chameria then was not a name that meant anything to Great Power diplomacy as a political factor but it nevertheless did exist, as the Albanian speaking inhabitants of the region that is now north-west Greece saw themselves as Chams. But it was a fragile identity. The term Cham has no existence in classical literature, whereas Epirus does. This was important given the centrality of neo-classical ideology in the construction of the new Greek state after 1835. After being in common parlance in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the name 'Chameria' gradually disappeared in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the expansion of Greece's northern borders and Ottoman retreat dominated events. The absence of an Albanian national

state until as late as 1912 was an important handicap to the Chams, as a friendly kinship state on the northern boundary of their historic territory.

This story of the largely subterranean survival of a Cham identity through the disasters and ethnic cleansing of the twentieth century is very little known outside the Albanian world. The historiography of Chameria/Thesprotia is a very incomplete and fragmentary narrative, even by Balkan standards. In the Albanian story, there is little sustained historical writing although a plethora of personal memoirs and essentially antiquarian excursions into the past of a particular locality or family. Compared to the rich local narrative of Kosova and Macedonian Albanian history writing, this is little indeed. In contrast, on the Greek side of the debate, there is a long-established canonical version of twentieth century history which has been efficiently promoted in all school and education textbooks, also by the Greek Orthodox Church, and in the vast majority of the historiography of the key World War II and Greek Civil War period. Most of this narrative has become accepted as standard outside Greece, most strongly in neighbouring nations such as Serbia with their own motives to diminish Albanian influence in the Balkans.

Their view of the Cham story is very limited, and purports to be only a minor footnote in the wide and complex story of Balkan nationalities and Balkan minorities who after the end of the Ottoman Empire felt aggrieved at their status and position within a new post-Ottoman nation. The Greek narrative is in essence a simple tale, of a remnant of the Ottoman world, the Cham Albanians, who lived a tenuous life in ever diminishing numbers in 'Greek' Epirus, and most importantly, clung on (or most of them did) to the religion of the old Empire, Sunni Islam, that of the collapsed Caliphate. They were, in colloquial parlance, 'losers', with all that implies. In the historiography, Greece is seen as representing westernising modernity, and 'civilisation', against the Chams role as fragmentary survivors of a dead empire and its backward, defeated and 'Eastern' culture and religion. As in all nationalist myths, there are some historic facts underpinning the inflated story. Faced with the modernising realities of Greek nationalism after

the Ottomans left the region in 1913, many Chams also 'drifted away' (or were forced to leave) in the interwar period, to escape rural decline, unemployment and poverty, until what is in Greek eyes, the culminating Cham folly occurred that destroyed their legitimacy as Greek citizens, support of some Chams for the Italian invasion and Axis Occupation. Although Chameria had not been important in the Treaty of Lausanne deliberations in 1922-23, the Lausanne mechanisms of the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey tended to legitimise Greek expulsions of Chams, in Greek nationalist eyes. This led to their 'final' expulsion in 1943-1944 at the hand of Napoleon Zervas's nationalist militia EDES. Virtually all Muslim Chams were dead, or had left Epirus. The remaining Orthodox Chams chose to assimilate, or were forced to do so by post-World War II Greek governments and left their Souli and other mountain redoubts to quiet anonymous lives in the growing new towns of Epirus, or emigrated abroad, or simply moved to Athens.

This Greek view of the history of the Chams in the twentieth century has dominated all international academic discourse about the subject until very recently. In both Peace Conferences held after the World Wars, Greece also tried to expand further northwards by taking 'Vorio Epirus', northern Epirus, that part of southern Albania stretching up to the Shkumbini River from Albania. The history of the modern Greek state after 1832 has been one of continuous northern expansion, so much so that some historians of modern Greece such as John Koliopoulos have questioned whether even the concept of a final and fixed northern border for the nation ever existed. Greek northward expansion was a product of the overwhelmingly strong influence of the *Megali Idea*, the 'Great Idea', the concept of the restoration of the 'Greek' Byzantine Empire through an ever-expanding Greek nation state after the departure of the Ottoman Empire from history.

The expansion of Greece along the Adriatic coast of the mainland opposite the Ionian Islands received a decisive setback with the establishment of the independence of Albania in 1912. It was achieved through resisting Greek and Serbian policy to prevent the emergence of

an Albanian state and divide the territory between them. Yet independence was achieved. The hundredth anniversary of that event will be celebrated in Tirana and throughout the Albanian world this year. Albania has been less successful over that period in reuniting the disparate parts of its political firmament compared to Greece. This has not been only a matter of the delay in achieving Kosova's limited independence in 2008. The Albanians, reemerging, as Reginald Hibbert put it, onto the Balkan scene after the Hoxhaist years, did not have a good position in international academic and associated political discourse about the Balkans to put their case forwardⁱⁱ.

Greece was able to dominate discussion about the region throughout the twentieth century. The Chams are a little known people. On the Albanian side of the border, the post-1944 refugee Chams were an unpopular group in Hoxha's Albania and few were able to obtain higher education or rise to prominent positions. In the Diaspora, principally in Turkey, many chose to abandon much or all of their Albanian identity when faced with the intensely conformist pressures of the Turkish education system under Ataturk and his successors, and Turkish national indifference then to the cultural rights of all minorities. Rulers then saw the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne as having either downgraded or abolished minority rights as an issue of concern in South East Europe. The Greek government took up the intellectual position that has been maintained across the board until recently that there were no ethnic minorities in Greece. Religious difference was also downgraded, in both Greece and Turkey. Religious people from Balkan refugee, usually but not all Muslims or of partly Muslim origins have had a low status and regard in twentieth century Turkey until the arrival of the Erdogan government where many prominent figures, including Erdogan himself, come from Balkan Muslim families.

The Greek academic tradition is certainly very powerful, and has been very closely integrated with state political objectives in the field of modern history not merely in the Cold War period, but for long before in many fields of enquiry, most obviously those concerning Macedonia and its identity, but the power and cogency of this tradition does not, in my opinion, fully explain the

absence of a Chameria history narrative, or the difficulty the Chams have had in establishing themselves on the 'cultural map' of post-communist Balkan minorities in the post 1989 period. It was difficult for the critics of the canonical Greek view of modern Macedonian history to make headway post-1989 but they certainly quickly did so, as the bitter exchanges inside and outside universities involving the work of independent-minded scholars such as Loring Danforth and Anastasia.N.Karakasidou show in the mid-1990's. Similar vigorous debate has taken place between Greek and Turkish historians over Cyprus issues. In recent years there has also been a marked improvement in the historiography in Greece itself of the Muslim minority in Thrace, culminating in recent London publication on the subject, with Anglo-Greek authorshipⁱⁱⁱ. In contrast, Cham history writing has been confined to study of the World War II period and the relationship between the Cham Albanians, Greece and Albania as states, and the Italian occupiers, and has a highly tendentious character, seeking to show that the Chams were not active Axis collaborators, and by implication, responsible for their own later misfortunes.

Why is writing the history of Chameria apparently so difficult, and publication on it seems to be so fragmentary and incomplete? It is worth remembering that in terms of classical antiquarianism, and the Grand Tour, Epirus hardly existed, apart from passing coastal interest in the site of the Battle of Actium near Preveza, and the relatively accessible ruins of ancient Nicopolis. The magnificent structures at ancient Butrint (Buthrotum) were unknown, and the area was a feverish swamp. In terms of archaeological discovery, the theatre at Dodona was a late addition to the classical pantheon, and in any case was not within the Greek state until after 1913. In Ottoman times the area was an overgrown wilderness inhabited only by shepherds. Epirus is not mentioned at all in the standard history of the Grand Tour^{iv}. Finding a sense of what a Cham narrative might include is as much a problem for foreign writers as for Albanian and Greek historians. At one level there are seemingly easy answers, as indicated above.

There are also deeper problems, which relate to developments with the establishment of the British Empire and British naval supremacy in the Mediterranean after the seminal event of the

British defeat of Napoleon in the Battle of the Nile in 1799. The contest between French and British naval power over the replacement of Venice as the main Adriatic and East Mediterranean sea power was not new in Napoleon or Ali Pasha's time. But it intensified markedly then. Ali Pasha sought to curry favour with both powers and to trade influence in his *pashlik* whenever he could. Both governments placed envoys in his court, and both of them, the Frenchman Pouqueville and the Englishman William Martin Leake acted as *de facto* spies for their respective governments in Paris and London. As Richard Davenport observed the mid-nineteenth century author who was Ali Pasha's first biographer, 'Bonaparte counted much on the active cooperation of Ali', and when his cooperation did not materialise, French ambitions in the region never recovered.^v

Chameria lies on the north-west Greek landmass at a time of the construction of British naval supremacy in the Ionian Islands off the coast. The dialectic of Chameria and Thesprotia is essentially that of the mainland versus these heavily fortified and British-controlled islands. The tiny Ottoman-period ports like Sagiada on the mainland facing Corfu were of little or no importance compared to those on the Ionian Islands themselves. It is sometimes forgotten nowadays how much the development of the British Empire was a naval project, and how far political policy in London, in general, was determined by Royal Naval priorities. The fortification of the Ionians, principally Corfu, was driven by the need to construct a sea empire for British trade at a time when the nation was excluded from most of Continental Europe by Napoleon and his realms of control. The British presence became deeply engaged in the communities such as Corfu, Gibraltar and Malta and elsewhere which were under effective Royal Naval government, sometimes virtually openly, as on the Ionian-governed island of Kithira for a long period. As Robert Holland points out,

'So entrenched did the British become in significant parts of the Mediterranean that their presence became something deeper: a world of its own, though like all such phenomena, one shot through with other worlds, presences and rivalries.'^{vi}

British naval power was projected, particularly after about 1840, through a series of colonial island Alamos of which perhaps Malta and Corfu became the most characteristic. The Epirus mainland was of little interest to Corfu government magnates like Sir Thomas Maitland, once Corfu was secured for London, and it became a place to go duck shooting and little else. Once great centres of trade like Butrint had collapsed into malarial stagnation, and they and many other places were too small and silted up to accommodate British ships. The Ionian Islands represented progress and modernity and integration into an expanding world-empire as opposed to the near-medieval conditions in the collapsing Ottoman world in mainland Chameria and Epirus generally. Yet it was also the case that however bad these mainland conditions were, they did not involve the persecution of Christian minorities along the lines of the conflicts that brought Great Power attention and subsequent intervention in the Crete crisis of 1867. Christian and Sunni and Bektashi Muslim Chams co-existed with Christian Greeks, Vlachs and Roma of both religions in relative harmony, compared to many Balkan Ottoman domains, and so the region attracted little attention from the liberal imperialists in the Gladstonian, post-Batak tradition. After the 1820's, the Adriatic had become a British lake in terms of power projection, and it was a matter of massive indifference what happened on most of the coastal littorals, with the exception of the ambitions of the Habsburgs centred on Trieste as the century drew towards its close.

As the nineteenth century wore on, Greece began to expand northwards towards Epirus. Towns on the southern fringe of old Chameria with substantial Albanophone elements in the population like Arta (Greek after 1881) and Preveza (Greek after 1913) and the rural areas near the enormous fortress of Vonitsa on Gulf of Actium began to see changes in their population composition, particularly after the time when Arta became the boundary between the Ottoman Empire and the expanding Greek state. Preveza was fiercely contested by the emerging Albanian nationalist organisation the League of Prizren, and it was not finally surrendered to the Greek state until the fighting there in the Second Balkan War was concluded in 1913. This event in practice in my opinion marks the beginning of the end of Ottoman

Chameria, at least as a potential Albanian nation state formation component, along with the retreat of the Turks from Ioannina at the same time and the mass expulsion of a significant proportion of the Albanophone and other minority populations. Historic time was changing the Albanian geographical space, to the advantage of the Greeks following their traditional 'northern' policy of border-creating war against the remaining Ottoman dominions. The British on the Ionian Islands had little detailed interest in developments, other than a general welcome for the expansion of Greece as a traditional friend of British naval power. Rival Great Powers such as the French and Germans were not involved, and Habsburg naval ambitions were not being matched by practical naval construction. Ports on the southern Cham coast were unimportant except for local trade with Corfu. Very little indeed was known of Albanian nationalism in London. The prevailing view in many London institutions was heavily influenced by the outcome of the Congress of Berlin in 1878 when Bismarck had stated that the Albania was only a geographic expression, not a nation. He was only saying openly what many diplomats and power-elite members privately believed and the Berlin Congress and its aftermath was in every sense, Bismarck's Congress^{vii}. The 'concert of Europe' had to follow Prussian leadership afterwards on many issues and the future of Chameria was only one very minor issue in most eyes.

On the ground these deliberations were unknown to most Chameria inhabitants, who might as well have been living in medieval China for all they knew of the external world, apart, perhaps, from a small minority of coastal dwellers who were literate and had access to some information through Ionian island links. Unlike in some other parts of the late Ottoman Empire where ethnic Albanians had taken part in revolts against Imperial rule, in northern Chameria/Epirus there were few *ciflik* estates with large areas of fertile land and equally large heavily exploited workforces prone to radical ideas and armed revolt. The Cham/Thesprotia land is dominated by immense Pindus and Souli mountains with scattered pastoralist populations, and towns (with the exception of Ioannina) surrounded for the most part by limited areas of cultivable land. This has remained the case since antiquity. It has always given

the region a sense of being a somewhat separate world from the Greek – or Albanian – mainstreams. Geographical space is central to this. Cary comments in his *Geographical Background of Greek and Roman History* that:

‘The interior of Epirus is sundered into separate compartments by an intricate system of ridges towering over deeply sunk valleys.....its political detachment has a valid explanation in its geographical seclusion’.^{viii}

In the Ottoman period the region did not lend itself to the pattern of agriculture favoured by the Imperial rulers and amongst other things this resulted in the relative absence of much of a *Bey* class of the type who formed the backbone of Albanian nationalist political consciousness from the *Rilindja* national revival period in the latter half of the nineteenth century through to the Ambassadors Conference and the First World War. Cham Albanians who were integrated into the Ottoman world tended to be urban dwellers who owed their main loyalty to the army system and the Sunni mosques. Politically radical imams were confined to a few centres like Paramithia where nationalist ideas had made more headway among the Albanian-speaking population. The Albanian-speaking Orthodox Christians in the Souli Mountains and nearby had no discernible political leadership at all. At a political level the detachment of the Beys from the Empire led to transference of loyalty to the ideal of an Albanian national state. Local imams were often culturally conservative. Cham-majority religion was the religion of Sunni Islam, the religion of rule of the Turks, and the *tekkes* and rural shrines of the dissident Bektashi sect that is very closely associated with Albanian nationalism had only a very limited presence, and in some centres, like Ioannina, they were also closely connected with the Ottoman garrison. The Chams in their small northern market towns like Filiates or a small coastal centre like *Murtos*, modern Greek Sivota, had few leaders of any standing compared to other parts of the Albanian world.

The isolation of Chameria/Thesprotia was eroded by the First World War period, but not dramatically so. The geographical space was not fought over on land once the remnants of the

Ottoman army left from the 1913 debacle had disappeared, and Chameria remained in rural torpor in World War I, benefitting from the complete absence of harbours capable of taking large ships along the coast. The newly delineated Greek-Albanian state border that had emerged from the Protocols of Florence period held, to the surprise of many observers and the Greek attempts to reopen the Issue at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 came to nothing^{ix}. Rather in the manner of the Bismarckian dominance of the Berlin Congress, Woodrow Wilson and the Americans held sway over Versailles and the subsequent installation of the League of Nations at Geneva. Washington was able to successfully protect the infant Albanian state from the ambitious attentions of the Greek irredentists, much as contemporary Kosova is protected from Serbian border revisionism by Washington nowadays. But it was not willing or able to reopen the issues of the division of the Albanian people between four countries that had emerged from the pre-1914 international conferences.

These constraints on the Cham issue remained until the end of communism in Albania and elsewhere between 1990 and 1992. Oral tradition remained strong in the Cham world, both at an 'underground' level in remote areas of the countryside where the writ of Athens has never run very far, and in the rich collections of oral material in the Cham Diaspora in the United States. In Albania a Cham party has been founded and has representation in the national parliament. Important works on Greek – Albanian relations have been published in Albania, principally the writings of Beqir Meta, which have put study of the genocide/expulsions period on a professional historical basis.^x At the same time, important changes in the population composition of Epirus have taken place. Rural depopulation has been important, with many Greek villages more or less abandoned except in the mid-summer.^{xi} Albanian migration has increased, bearing out the old adage of Balkan history writing that if the borders do not move, the people often do^{xii}. The general Greek view has been that Zervas's actions in 1943-1944 effectively closed the Cham historical chapter, and old Cham geographical space has now become only 'historic' Greek Epirus. It must be doubtful if this will be the case.

ⁱ Davenport.R.A. 'The Life of Ali Pasha of Tepelena, Vizier of Epirus: surnamed Aslan or the Lion', London, 1837, P.4.ff

ⁱⁱ See paper by Reginald Hibbert, 'Albania's Emergence onto the Balkan Scene, 'Balkan Studies', 38.1, Thessaloniki, 1997, republished in 'Albania and the Albanians Essays in Honour of Sir Reginald Hibbert' Ed.J.Pettifer, London, 2013, forthcoming.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Featherstone.K(Ed) 'The Last Ottomans: the Muslim minority of Western Thrace during the Axis Occupation and the Greek Civil War', Basingstoke, 2011

^{iv} Black.J,'The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century', New York, 1992

^{vi} Holland.R,' Blue Water Empire The British and the Mediterranean since 1800', P.5.ff

^{vii} This did not of course mean the legacy of the Berlin Congress remained the same over the years, any more than that of the Versailles conference did post-World War I. For a near-contemporary German view, see Brandenburg.E. (trans Adams.E.A.). 'From Bismarck to the World War A History of German Foreign Policy 1870-1914,Oxford, 1927

^{viii} Cary.M ' Geographical Background to Greek and Roman History', Oxford, 1949, p.56 ff

^{ix} See, for a pro-Greek account of what happened, Petsalis-Diomidis.N,' Greece at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919', Thessaloniki, 1978. The Greek difficulty was that the Entente powers were really only interested in questions about the future of Thrace and Asia Minor issues, whereas Venizelos saw the issues of 'Vorio Epirus' as a central issue in the future power relations in the post-war Adriatic. His major concessions to Italy have been claimed by his critics to have laid the basis for many future problems and encouraged the expansionist thinking of the Italian fascists about Albania.

^x See Meta.B,'Greek-Albanian Tensions 1939-1949', Tirana, 2006

^{xi} See Vickers.M. 'C'po Behet me Ceshtjen Came?', Tirana, 2005

^{xii} For useful factual background, see Green.S.F. 'Notes from the Balkans Locating Marginality and Ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian Border', Princeton, 2005