

## THE ENIGMA OF MONTENEGRIN HISTORY-THE EXAMPLE OF SVAČ

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In most periods of Montenegrin history, the coast has been of the greatest significance, from the original ancient traders and colonists who ventured north to found colonial settlements, and throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods. Coastal trade and associated military shipping were what mattered, whether under the Roman and Byzantine empires, the Angevin conquests of the Adriatic in the Middle Ages, or the Venetians. Yet the object of this history has been very little known, or visited. For long periods, Montenegro and Montenegrins did not impinge on the wider European consciousness as either a state or a people. In the nineteenth century, when the first Montenegrin state emerged after the Congress of Berlin in 1878, it was wrapped in a romantic mythology of mountain life that distorted its real history. The emergence of the new country after the May 2006 independence referendum is likely to bring renewed debate about these issues.<sup>1</sup>

A coastal site such as little known Svač, near the most southern Montenegrin town of Ulcinje, illustrates this process. The isolation of Svač and its near-disappearance is a paradigm of twentieth-century and Cold War border impositions. It illustrates the distortions and displacements of its published history in the Yugoslav period, and its

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<sup>1</sup> See also Elizabeth Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain. A History of Montenegro* (London, 2007).

emergence into normal Montenegrin society in recent years. It illustrates both the complex interfaces on borders, where culture, religion and popular memory interact and often collide, and the difficulties historians face, given the extreme paucity of archaeological work in many places in the non-Greek Balkan lands.<sup>2</sup>

There has been almost no sustained archaeological work or scientific survey of the site, as is also the case with many others in Montenegro. There is also the matter of the relationship of the past to the present in the fact that the shared contradictions and elisions in the history of Svač illustrate the wider histories of both northern Albania and Montenegro.

#### SVAC̆ - THE CONTEXT

In inland southern Montenegro in the vicinity of Lake Shkodra near the northern Albanian border there are a number of little known archaeological sites. The region has been remote and under populated since late Ottoman times, and the only relatively well known places are coastal towns such as Bar, with its nearby fine medieval and Venetian town of Stari Bar, and Ulcinje, Roman Olcinium and Venetian Dulcingo, with a similar inheritance. In the communist period, from 1945 to 1990, the border area was heavily militarised in both Albania and Montenegro and it was dominated by closed areas that made it impossible to visit the inland sites.<sup>3</sup> Normal transport links had been disrupted

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<sup>2</sup> For analysis of these issues as they affect the archaeology of the southern border of Albania with Greece see William Bowden, *Epirus Vetus. The Archaeology of a Late Antique Province* (London, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Svač is not mentioned at all in the most authoritative guide to Titoist Yugoslavia. J.A. Cuddon, *The Companion Guide to Yugoslavia* (London, 1974), although there is a

since the Tito-Stalin split in the world communist movement in 1948, when the small road border crossing south of Lake Shkodra at Muriquan was closed. It was reopened in 2004. Both southern inland Montenegro and northwest Albania were neglected by the communist regimes, and both remain predominantly poor. There is a dominant rural society, based on very small villages with families dependent on pastoral agriculture and cash remittances from family members working abroad.

Svač, or Shesh, as it is known by the members of the ethnic Albanian minority community in Montenegro who live in the surrounding area, is the largest archaeological site in this region.<sup>4</sup> It is situated on a small hillock about twenty kilometres east from the sea coast of the Adriatic, and about fifteen kilometres north of the Montenegrin border with northern Albania. The visible ruins are composed of the remains of remarkable medieval churches - two main churches and six smaller ones - and some fortifications. It is seen in regional historiography as almost exclusively a product of the medieval period. The information given about it in the most recent Yugoslav heritage reference book, *Treasures of Yugoslavia* (Belgrade, 1988), is as follows:<sup>5</sup>

'Svač fortress, the ruins of a medieval town above Saska Lake not far from Ulcinje. The date of its construction is not known. Pope Alexander II mentioned the town in a bull

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lengthy section on Ulcinje.

<sup>4</sup> For a Montenegrin view of the history of the Albanian minority community see Miodrag Marovic, *Balkanski Džoker Albanija I Albanci* (Bar, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> The information given in current Montenegrin middle school and university textbooks is very similar. They also mention four local monasteries, as part of the new emphasis on clerical nationalism in Montenegro in recent years.

dated 1067 when Svač was an Episcopal seat. Shattered by the Mongols in 1242, Serbian Queen Helen of Anjou had it rebuilt in the late 13th century. In the 15th century the Venetians seized the fortress, and in 1571 it fell to the Turks. Svač went into a decline in the early 15th century..... By 1610 the town had been destroyed.....in the 17th century it lay in ruins, abandoned to the elements.'

The author goes on to describe the visible ruins, dominated by the remains of the Cathedral of St John and the Church of St Mary, featuring Romanesque and Gothic elements, and refers to a few 'wooden' churches in the lower town.

#### THE SITE AND THE AREA

Svač hill stands immediately to the south of a small lake surrounded by large reed beds, Lake Šasko. The general vicinity comprises low quality semi-karst land, dominated by small scale pastoral farming, with holdings originating from the break up of Ottoman-period čifliks after the Second Balkan War in 1913. In the centre of the lower village is the massive overgrown ruin of an old pasha's house that according to local oral tradition was burnt out in the second Balkan War in 1913. Widespread but localised violence was endemic in the region in late Ottoman times, particularly after 1908, linked to the support of the northern Albanian clans for the Young Turk revolution in Constantinople. The region remained in obscurity under both Royalist Yugoslavia and communism, and collectivisation was barely evident; land ownership patterns are still in essence those dating from the First World War period.

Modern Svač village lies on the small asphalt road running between the major coastal town of Ulcinje and Shkodra to the south. The archaeological site of Svač sits on top of the hill, on a windy open plain of rough scrubland. The modern village of Shesh is

about a kilometre away. The economy is almost entirely based on sheep, as it always has been, and the ethnic Albanian families have a tradition of emigration to New York City. The members of one leading family, the Shkreli, are prominent building contractors in Manhattan, and remittances from the United States diaspora have played a key role in the local economy since the 1930's. The Albanians in this part of southern Montenegro are overwhelmingly Muslim, with a few Roman Catholics. This is in contrast with the position nearer the coast, and over the border in northern Albania, where there is a much bigger Catholic presence. The little town of Vladimir, about twelve kilometres to the north east of Svač, is the nearest urban centre. The name of Vladimir was restored by the Yugoslav communists in 1949 and was almost certainly derives from that of St Vladimir, whose main shrine in the region was at Elbasan in Albania. Under the Ottomans it went by the name of Kalkeren and was a very minor Ottoman garrison centre on the east-west road that passes through it, linking Shkodra with this part of the coast.

This region was first traveled and studied in detail by the well known English Balkanist Mary Edith Durham in the Edwardian period. She noted, in *Through the Lands of the Serb* (1904), the extreme difficulties facing the traveller north of Shkodra, with vast tracts of flooded marshlands (before modern land drainage schemes), with her horse 'splashing through water almost up to his belly'. It was perhaps not surprising that she did not venture near Svač or make the diversion from the main route (see map XXX below) to visit the archaeological site. Given Miss Durham's curiosity, energy and expertise in travel in the region, this is perhaps a sign of the remoteness or lack of awareness of the ruins as recently as 1903. Nor did Hugo Grothe, the main pre-World War I German expert on the region, cover the Svač area in his extensive study of the border region,

*Durch Albanien und Montenegro* (Munich, 1913). Grothe had close connections with German military intelligence and although ostensibly a travel book, the work includes much of military interest, with a detailed discussion of the Battle of Scutari between the Turks and Montenegrins in November, 1912.

The lake is nowadays fed by the small river flowing down from the peak of Mali Dan (1228m) to the north. The surrounding ground is still very marshy. A small settlement known as Ambula was situated here, and the name has survived up to the present day in a very small fishing, tourist and wildfowling community on the lakeside. The road route is very ancient and follows the only continuous dry land above the floodplain of the Drin River and the hills surrounding Lake Shkodra (the Rumija hills in Serbo-Croat) which links the city of Shkodra (medieval and Ottoman Scutari) with Ulcinje on the coast. Patterns of material production that originated in very remote times continue to the present day. Apart from sheep farming, the area has been important for salt production in all historical periods, with very large salt flats behind the dunes along the coast north of Ulcinje being highly productive. It is likely that economic activity in antiquity and the medieval period along the Ulcinje-Shkodra road was dominated by trade in salt, particularly with the inland Balkans, and movement of meat and other foods towards the coastal cities.<sup>6</sup>

The coast has undergone very significant changes over time, linked to changes in

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<sup>6</sup> See Mark Kurlansky, *Salt. A World History* (London, 2003). For regional transport routes in the medieval and Ottoman periods see Walter Shtyalla, *Rruget dhe Urat e Vjetra ne Shqiperi* (Tirana, 1997) and E. Zachariadou, ed., *The Via Egnatia under Ottoman Rule* (Rethymnon, 1996).

the level of the sea, and later, in the mid-twentieth century, to major land drainage and hydroelectric and flood control schemes. Much of the lowlands along the coast of Albania and southern Montenegro have been subject to silting and major changes of outline since antiquity, leading to important sites such as Butrint in southern Albania becoming malarial swamps in the later Ottoman period, or Apollonia, once a Roman port near the modern town of Fier, being marooned far inland.

In the seventeenth century, Venetian maps show a second small lake, Lake Sogagni, between the main Shkodra lake and Lake Šasko (Italian Sfaccio), and this may have existed earlier. Sogagni must have dried up sometime in the late Ottoman period, and now forms part of the salt flats behind Ulcinje. It is shown on the maps as directly linked to the River Boyana by a small channel, with a bridge, the Ponte di Zorni, carrying the Scutari-Dulcingo road. All this has totally disappeared and all the modern visitor can see is a confused pattern of reedbeds. It is impossible to understand either the known history of Svač and region, or to attempt a reconstruction of the substantial period of history that is currently obscure without reference to the processes of coastline and riparian change. The map below indicates the position of Svač and vicinity in relation to main surrounding coastal and riparian lands.

In antiquity the Adriatic coast had a different pattern, and some of the land that now forms very extensive inland marshes along the entire Adriatic coast south to north west Greece was dry land. Svač was then probably very near navigable water for ancient shipping and the modern Lake Šasko may have been virtually a marshy inlet of the sea. The little Svač hill would have been easily visible from the sea inlets and subject to the cultural forces associated with coastal trade, colonisation, and piracy, and in the pre-

Roman period, whatever settlement there was would have been a satellite settlement for the Illyrian kingdom of Gentius based on Shkodra.<sup>7</sup>

The processes of coastal change can be seen on a larger scale at an important centre such as ancient Lissus, modern Lezhe, two hundred kilometres to the south in Albania, which was a Roman port. Nowadays, this is well inland and surrounded by extensive drained marshlands. Along the modern northern Albania/Montenegrin border, the major river in the region, the Drin, had a much wider and more diffuse delta than nowadays, and torrential storms in the winter caused widespread flooding. Human settlement on the adjacent lands was therefore always concentrated on the numerous little hills that protrude from the marshland.

The Svač hill with its ample fish in the lake was therefore an attractive place of settlement by tribal people from the earliest times. Illyrian tribes began to build fortified settlements along the coast by the middle of the third century BC, of which Shkodra and Lissus were the most important, but all were designed to guard the routes inland and secure the coast for shipping. There may also have been a shrine associated with the lake. The main centre of Shkodra had grown rapidly in the fourth century BC, and the growing city offered a good market for food products and formed a centre for several small satellite settlements dotted around the lake vicinity. Urbanisation on the Svač and other local surrounding hills was in all probability extremely limited, but it would have served as a roughly fortified hill site where herdsmen or flocks on the move took refuge, and as an inhabitable place in the wet months and times of inundation of surrounding land.

#### SVVAČ-SHESH: A CONTESTED HISTORY

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<sup>7</sup> See J.J. Wilkes, *Dalmatia* (London, 1969).



Modern boundaries have little to tell us about past history. Montenegrins trace their history and their name to the later medieval period, but this corner of the new state had already seen many successive historical transformations from antiquity onwards. The Romans extended their power across the Adriatic in the second century BC. This part of the coastal area was not part of the Roman province of Macedonia but came during the first century AD within the new province of Dalmatia, with its capital at Salona near Split; thus it looked already to the north and the Adriatic coast. However later reorganization brought it within a new late Roman province of Praevalitana, with its administrative capital at Shkodra, and so for a while it turned to the south and to what was eventually to become northern Albania.<sup>8</sup>

Shkodra was an important late Roman urban centre and whatever the political borders at any period it always had natural ties with surrounding settlements. This part of the Adriatic coast was controlled in the first half of the sixth century by the Ostrogoths, who had invaded from Italy. The next period is more obscure; hardly anything is known directly about Svač before the late medieval period, and there is nothing at all in early written sources. Apart from later documentary material, we largely depend on the accounts of two medieval writers, the twelfth-century priest from Duklja (Dioclea) and the thirteenth-century Thomas, Archdeacon of Split.<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested that the

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<sup>8</sup> M. Quku, ed., *Seminari I Pare Nderkombetar 'Shkodra ne Shekuj'* (Shkodra, 1994), contains a representative cross-section of Albanian views.

<sup>9</sup> *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja: Letopis popa Dujljanina*, ed. F. Čičik (Belgrade, 1928), V. Mosin (Zagreb, 1950), a highly unreliable source known only from a much later Latin translation of the Slavonic original; Thomas of Split, *Historia Salonitana*, ed.,

Roman/Byzantine fortifications at Svač date from the extensive work on defences undertaken in Illyricum under the Emperor Justinian (527-65), who also made war on the Ostrogoths in Italy, but there is no direct evidence for this. Among the most obscure periods is that of the early middle ages, with the disintegration of the late Roman provincial system and the settlement of Slavs and others.<sup>10</sup> As insecurity increased, populations all over the Balkans moved to fortified hill sites and thriving urban centres declined. In some cases new fortified centres were established on earlier sites. A profound change took place in Illyricum during the sixth century: it became a landscape of *kastra*, fortified places, of which Svač may have been one. In any case, Svač was a place which faced in more than one direction, as is shown also by its position in the struggle for control between the papacy and Byzantium during the medieval period.

Under the ecclesiastical organisation of the later Roman Empire, the whole diocese of Illyricum had been under Rome, with a papal vicariate at Thessalonica. The church was not yet split between Catholic and Orthodox, and we hear of a few bishops from Illyricum who are said to have attended church councils in Constantinople in the seventh century. Under the Emperor Leo III (717-41) Byzantium claimed the diocese for its own jurisdiction, but in 860 Pope Nicholas I demanded its return to Rome, in the context of an active missionary effort by the west. Both the papacy and Byzantium were interested in the eventual conversion of the Bulgarian Tsar Boris, and Byzantium was

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F. Rački (Zagreb, 1894). The documentary evidence can be found in the volumes of *Acta Albaniae* and *Acta Albaniae Veneta*.

<sup>10</sup> See V. Popović, 'Byzantins, slaves et autochthones', in *Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin*, Coll. École française de Rome 77 (Rome, 1984), 181-243.

very suspicious of Frankish aims in the region. The pope and the patriarch Photius in Constantinople competed for Boris's allegiance, and eventually Bulgaria was placed under the patriarchate and Church Slavonic was adopted for the Bulgarian liturgy.

Once Shkodra and the area around it came under Ottoman rule in the late fifteenth century the settlement of Svač was abandoned and Sarda and Svač are said to have lain in ruins. But Svač had had a long history. The ecclesiastical remains have been studied from the point of view of their architectural features, and belong mainly to the late medieval period. However, limited archaeological investigation in the areas of the fortifications carried out in the 1980s brought to light quantities of small objects found in successive burials from periods from the sixth to the twelfth centuries AD.<sup>11</sup> They included early Byzantine jewellery and small objects connected by the excavator with similar material typical of Dalmatia, as well as Slav pottery and utensils. Material from the surface levels included pottery and jewellery from the Serbian and Venetian periods. Two of the main churches, St Mary and St John, both with Gothic features, seem to have been built over earlier structures, and the fortifications seem to have been remodeled in about the twelfth century, the period from which most of the churches date, and also to have been substantially rebuilt after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. The site was therefore also inhabited over several centuries during the earlier medieval period, even when there is little or no textual evidence. It is less easy however to establish who the inhabitants were or whether that occupation was continuous.

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<sup>11</sup> E. Zechević, 'The results of the exploration of medieval Svač', *Glasnik Srbskog arheoloshkog drushtva* 5 (1989), 112-17 (in Serbian); our thanks for help are due to Dr. M. Zivković, E. Georgievska and Dr. Will Bowden.

Questions of ethnic or cultural identity in the earlier medieval period are surprisingly difficult to answer, even without the complications of modern political agendas. For example, Slav raids had already reached west as far as Dyrrachium (modern Durrës) in the mid-sixth century AD, and in the late sixth century groups of Slavs invaded Greece and the Greek islands, Thessalonica and the Balkans, and reached the Adriatic coast.<sup>12</sup> Their impact on population and settlement is often hard to trace, and was strongly denied in Albania in the communist period as a matter of ideology. Their identification as ‘Slavs’ is also problematic. Nevertheless it is because of this Slav presence that the majority language of modern Montenegro is Slavic.

According to Albanian communist historical writing the grave goods known from several sites in northern Albania are witness to the re-emergence of native Illyrian culture. It is far more likely, however that any remnants of the old Illyrian tribal societies had by this time been absorbed into a mixed population which included Slavs and other groups like the Latin-speaking population of the former late Roman province, believed to be the ancestors of the modern Vlachs.<sup>13</sup> There is no way of knowing exactly how much Illyrian culture remained, beyond a few place names, prior to the emergence of the Albanian language in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Between the late sixth century and the tenth, when there is a little more information, a process of assimilation and settlement had been taking place about which we are very poorly informed indeed. But

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<sup>12</sup> See F. Curta, *The Making of the Slavs. History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500-700* (Cambridge, 2001); *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250* (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> For Illyrians and Slavs see John Wilkes, *The Illyrians* (Oxford, 1992), 270-79.

even in the time of the medieval Serbian state the population was mixed, described by one writer as comprising people of Roman descent, those of Albanian origin and finally Slavs.<sup>14</sup>

Although border lines drawn on maps illustrating medieval history are apt to be somewhat arbitrary, it is clear that at its height in the early eleventh century the ‘first Bulgarian empire’ reached westwards across the Balkans from just north of Adrianople/Edirne and Thessalonica at least as far as Shkodra. The Bulgarians were originally a Turkic people from central Asia, who arrived in the Balkans in the late seventh century, and they too became Slavicised by mingling with the existing Slav population. But Ulcinje and its area came under Byzantine rule when a ‘theme’ (military district) was established at Dyrrachium; the Adriatic coast was of critical importance in confronting Arab sea-power, and a Byzantine province, later a theme, of Dalmatia was also established along the Adriatic coast northwards from Kotor, with its capital at Ragusa (Dubrovnik).<sup>15</sup> Insecurity was endemic in this period, and Dubrovnik itself was besieged by the Arabs in the ninth century. At the end of the tenth century the Bulgarian tsar Samuel attacked Ulcinje, but Byzantium under the Emperor Basil II defeated the Bulgarians and established a huge Byzantine province of Bulgaria in 1018, with an archbishopric at Ohrid (1020) whose diocese reached as far west as Dyrrachium.

Again Svač was on the edge. Rivalry arose between the Catholic dioceses of Ragusa, Split, and Bar, and in 1045 bishops from the Shkodra area are recorded as having been shipwrecked while traveling to a synod; the pope issued a bull transferring the

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<sup>14</sup> F.W. Carter, *Historical Geography of the Balkans* (London, 1996), 156.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Ferluga, *L’amministrazione bizantina in Dalmatia* (Venice, 1978).

bishoprics of Kotor, Ulcinje and Svač from Split to the archbishopric of Bar. From now on disputes surrounding the dioceses of Ragusa and Bar become a recurring theme.<sup>16</sup> The loyalties of the rulers of Duklja were also divided according to advantage between the pope and the Byzantine emperor, and this tension was heightened after the Byzantines lost Bari in 1071 and during the fighting between the Byzantines and the Normans in the late eleventh century; Mihailo (1046-81) received his royal insignia from the pope, and in 1089 Bodin obtained a bull from the anti-pope Clement III, confirming the jurisdiction of the new archbishopric of Bar over Duklja, Kotor, Ulcinje, Svač, Drisht (Drivastium) and Pilot (Polatum).<sup>17</sup> In the later twelfth century Stefan Nemanja (d. 1199) followed a similarly uncertain line between allying himself with the papacy and the Byzantine emperor. Defeated by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I, he was installed as a Byzantine vassal, but later rebelled, and having gained control of Niš, in 1189 he paid allegiance to Frederick Barbarossa and the Third Crusade. A further defeat brought him back to the Byzantine sphere, and his son was soon afterwards married to a Byzantine princess.

Despite this diplomatic wavering, Nemanja, the father of St. Sava, was the

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<sup>16</sup> A. Ducellier, *L'Albanie entre Byzance et Venise, Xe-XVe siècles* (London, 1987), XI ('Aux frontières de la Romanité et de l'orthodoxie au Moyen Âge: le cas d'Albanie'); S.M. Ćirković, *The Serbs* (Oxford, 2004), 28. For Ragusa see F.W. Carter, *Dubrovnik (Ragusa). A Classic City-State* (London, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> The complications of this period are brought out by L. Waldmüller, *Die Synoden in Dalmatien, Kroatien und Ungarn von der Volkerwanderung bis zum Ende der Arpaden (1311)* (Paderborn, 1987); for the intervention of Pope Innocent III in a dispute over the bishopric of Svač see 162.

founder of the medieval Orthodox Serbian monarchy, with its royal churches at Studenica, Gračanica, Dečani and Peć, and its Byzantine ideology and affiliation to many of the major centres of Orthodoxy. This is also the period of the most prominent visible ruins of Svač's surviving churches. Churches were built, at Svač, as elsewhere, to glorify and legitimize the power of the dynasty. While the term Serbia is found in a tenth-century Byzantine work for an area located between Croatia and Bulgaria and the Serbs are traced back in this text to the seventh century,<sup>18</sup> the historical origins of the medieval Serbian state lay in the eleventh century, with the rise of the local princes of Duklja.<sup>19</sup> Nemanja placed his son Vukan in control of Zeta (the term now being used for the former Dalmatia and Duklja), and modern-day Serbia traces its origin to the Nemanjid dynasty, especially to Sava, monk of the Athonite monastery of Vatopedi and the co-founder of the Serbian monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos, who became the first archbishop of a Serbian autocephalous church. The separation of Montenegro from Serbia thus entails for Serbia a separation from its sense of its own history on a par with, if not quite so acute, that entailed by that of the loss of Kosovo.

Montenegrin versions of this period hold that conversion to Orthodoxy only took place in this period, or even that it was a forced conversion; Nemanja allegedly destroyed Latin churches and books, and sacked whole towns. This resonates with current oral

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<sup>18</sup> Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik and R.J.H. Jenkins, rev. ed. (Washington, DC, 1967), 29, 32.

<sup>19</sup> For a much fuller account of these complex developments see Paul Stephenson, 'Balkan borderlands, 1018-1204', in J. Shepard, ed., *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

tradition in Svač/ Shesh, where residents claim that the churches were all 'originally Catholic'. A closer reading shows that the earlier tension or interplay between east and west continued during this period, with the powerful Queen Jelena (wife of Stefan Uroš I) being herself a Catholic. The coastal towns were regarded as targets of mission by the preaching orders, and under Stefan Uroš I (1243-76) Serbia opened its mines to Saxons from Hungary and its markets to Dalmatian merchants from the coast, and it exacted an annual tribute from Ragusa even while the latter was under Venetian suzerainty. But the heyday of the medieval Serbian state was short. The celebration of Serbian power embodied in the construction of the 'new' Svač churches was very temporary. According to Montenegrin accounts, Serbian rule began to crumble in the fourteenth century after the death of Stefan Dušan, referred to in Montenegrin material as a 'cruel tsar'. Soon, with the Balčić and Crnjević dynasties in Zeta, Montenegro supposedly regained its independence and 'restored' Montenegrin rulers; the national narrative continues with the claim that given this re-assertion of 'independence', the Ottoman empire never fully conquered Zeta, and, indeed, although it is unclear what their power really amounted to, there were prince-bishops and then princes of Cetigne from the sixteenth century until 1918.

The complex story outlined here is a highly simplified version of the many changes which Svač must have experienced before and during the Ottoman period. Together with Drisht and Kotor, Svač was attacked and damaged by the invading Mongols on their retreat from Dalmatia in 1241/42, but rebuilding seems to have taken place, and even in the absence of thoroughgoing archaeological excavation it is reasonable to suggest that the degree of devastation is exaggerated in the written sources.



In the second half of the fourteenth century the Catholic dioceses were at their height and a ‘John of Suacio’ lived in the household of the archbishop of Ragusa in 1365-71. The cathedral at Svač was repaired after damage in war in 1413. Again, local oral tradition is illuminating: the authors in 2004 found inhabitants of Ambula believing that ‘our real history is to be found in the Vatican’.

By the early fifteenth century Svač was petitioning Venice to fortify the town against the Turks; for the settlement of uncertainty about the extent of its territory; the bishop of Shkodra was to be consulted. A little later the bishop of Svač was praised and had land restored to him in recognition of his good Catholic behavior. By the late fifteenth century, when most of Albania was under Ottoman control, Venice held Bar and Kotor and Catholicism was firmly established along the coast. However, by the 1460s the bishops of Svač were absentees living in Italy and Venice was able to give away the town as *pronoia*. Already in the late fourteenth century Pilot, Shkodra and Sarda were described as being very poor, and by the late fifteenth century Svač, Sarda and Drisht all lay in ruins.<sup>20</sup>

In a classic travel work of the beginning of the last century, written from a very Catholic perspective by the local French consul, ‘Sciassi’ (Svač) is singled out for an evocative description of a ruined town that once had innumerable churches.<sup>21</sup> Its author even claims that he had a vision of a cross there over the church of Mary, while reflecting on the contemporary Orthodox village and the ‘fanatical’ Muslims of the Ottoman

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<sup>20</sup> K. Jiricek, ‘Albanien in der Vergangenheit’, in L. von Thallóczy, ed., *Illyrische-Albanische Forschungen*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1916), I, 63-93, at 83.

<sup>21</sup> A. Degrand, *Souvenirs de l’Haute Albanie* (Paris, 2001), 98.

conquest. Degrand took heart from the ‘French’ and Catholic Queen Jelena as he reflected on Serb ‘domination’, and claimed that the Serbian ‘imposition’ of Orthodoxy on this Catholic region under the Nemanjids had been short-lived. It is striking that the context for his description of Svač and related towns is not Montenegro but much more Edith Durham's ‘High Albania’, and the environs of Shkodra.

Little seems to have occurred in Svač during the Ottoman period. Once the Empire was established, the Porte lost interest in the Adriatic coast, and activity was based on the development of the rich resources of the southern Balkan interior as a source of meat and hides for the army. The important salt trade would, though, have been maintained, at some level, albeit in conditions of endemic disorder.<sup>22</sup> Throughout history, what is now the Albanian and Montenegrin coast has been subject to piracy. The Shkodra kingdom of Gentius was notorious for attacking Roman shipping in the Adriatic. After the Slav invasions, there was no naval power able to control the coast, and in later centuries medieval Dulcingo, and other ports further north, such as Kotor and Bar became fully-fledged mini-states based on looting passing shipping. It is true that the Ottoman conquest did not materially affect this situation, as the Porte never actually controlled much of what is now northern Albania or Montenegro. The boundary of

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<sup>22</sup> Recent scholarship suggests that major epidemics of bubonic plague were a crucial factor in the decline of Ottoman coastal trade along the Adriatic after about 1580.

Dulcingo was heavily involved in the slave trade with North Africa, where the disease was endemic, and was a main point of entry from the west into the Ottoman world. A discernable black minority descended from escaped slaves existed in modern Ulcinje until the 1950s: see Cuddon, *Companion Guide to Yugoslavia*.

nominal Ottoman power (and the Empire itself) followed the Boyana/ Buna river, which today marks a section of the Albanian-Montenegrin border west of Shkodra, but in practice Constantinople had very little control over what happened there, and imperial activity was focused on the Shkodra garrison and the collection of tax revenue from the northern Albanian tribes. By the mid and late eighteenth century, powerful semi-autonomous pashaliks such as that of the Bushatis dominated the area, forming a model for the ambitions of Ali Pasha Tepelena in southern Albania and Epirus a generation later.<sup>23</sup> As the Venetian Empire expanded, based on important centres such as Ragusa, modern Dubrovnik, a degree of maritime order was established, but this was very relative, and as Venetian power declined in the eighteenth century traditional patterns of disorder re-established themselves. The silting up of ports such as Lissus, modern Lezhe, also added to the decline and economic problems of the coast. In this context, a site like Svač was condemned to obscurity.

This situation continued throughout the twentieth century, apart from high points of international attention, such as the final delineation of the modern Albanian-Montenegrin border in the Versailles Treaty period, and at the time of the Stalin-Tito split in 1948. After the last five years, with the end of former Yugoslavia and the opening of the border to trade and tourists, as well as with new possibilities for serious archaeological investigation, Svač-Shesh will perhaps at last emerge from the shadows.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Svač is not a microcosm of the history of Montenegro as a whole, but as a case study it does illustrate the complexity of the national narrative that the

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<sup>23</sup> See K.E. Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte* (Princeton, 1996).

newly independent state will have to construct. It also illustrates wider and deeper problems of contemporary Balkan historiography that affect authors working on all periods. The southern Balkan states of Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia have a shared history, derived from their long centuries of rule in past multinational and multiconfessional empires, from Rome, through late antiquity and into the Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman periods. The communist experience post-1945 has not reduced their position as a place of contest between East and West.

The plethora of new states will all need new historical definition. No less than seven new countries, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and probably soon Kosovo, will have emerged from what was the former Yugoslavia, and in most cases local historians see themselves as ‘rescuing’ a lost national narrative from the distortions and illegitimacy of communist history. The case study illustrates that research also needs to focus on the earlier historical periods, in which national mythology is founded as much as in the period of resistance to the Ottomans and conventional wisdom of modern nationalism. In the secondary literature on Svač and its area in the ancient and medieval periods we find competing Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Albanian narratives, each of which is imbued with its own preconceptions. At the heart of the problem is the suppression of complexity, and the triumph of reductionist ideology. This leads to the creation of self-serving and competitive national identities/narratives which often lay very dubious claim to be the exclusive histories of areas of the shared past in the Balkans.

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First published by South Slav Journal, London, Vol 28, No 1-2, 2008 and  
Botashqiptare, Tirana, 2008, ISBN 978-999956-11-78-1 under title 'The Enigma of  
Montenegrin History The Example of Svac'.