

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Landscape transformations in Albania. A photographic survey on the traces of Italian travellers in the Balkans

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Abstract

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albania became a possible land of conquest for Italy, France, and Austria. Explorations and surveys of the newly liberated territory involved numerous scientific and military expeditions. At the end of the nineteenth century, the *Reale Società Geografica Italiana* had been carrying out a systematic study of Albanian landscape, mainly aimed at geographical research. Relevant Italian scholars and geographers travelled to Tirana and Valona. Antonio Baldacci (1867–1950) between 1892 and 1902, Roberto Almagià (1884–1962), Aldo Sestini (1904–1988) in 1940, Bruno Castiglioni (1898–1945) who recorded geomorphological aspects as an army officer following Italian troops. Two expeditions in 1940 allowed them to collect all the information needed to publish the fundamental monograph "L'Albania", printed in 1943. Bruno Castiglioni oversaw the geomorphological aspects of the study, Ferdinando Milone covered anthropology and economics, and Aldo Sestini investigated the geographical features of each region. Another landmark contribution is Antonio Baldacci's *Itinerari albanesi: (1892–1902)*, which described discovering an obscure land, its natural features and the built environment.

The contribution for the sixth issue of *Sophie* draws on a photographic campaign carried out between July 2016 and June 2018, and currently being finalised in the form of a Catalogue of Landscape Typologies. The author conducts a photographic campaign along the same itineraries covered by the aforementioned geographers, discovering similarities and differences with the contemporary Albanian landscape. Manuscripts, diplomatic accounts, publications, and photographs produced by Italian travellers of the early twentieth century are being compared with the current status of the visual environment. Tourism-related activities have altered the scenery of the coast, particularly the so-called Riviera that connects Vlorë with Sarandë, while other sectors of the northern mainland have remained relatively unchanged.

This ongoing research is expected to inform a general catalogue of Albanian landscapes, intended as a tool for planning future interventions across the country. The catalogue could be a useful tool to build an alternative visual cartography. The Catalogue of Landscape Typologies collects four hundred geolocated shots of selected views, which have been classified and redrawn to identify recurring features and visual landmarks. Images are being disassembled in coherent morphological layers: woods, agricultural plains, cultivated slopes, spontaneous vegetation fields, urbanization areas, water bodies and the profile of the mountains. Contemporary Albania and other countries in the Balkans are rapidly changing the quality of its built environment in an attempt to emerge and progress towards the European standards. On the other hand, one could argue that unique views can be lost along the way.

Keywords: Albania, landscape, catalogue, travel, panorama

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Introduction

A general explanatory catalogue of Albanian landscapes could be a relevant cognitive tool for planning future interventions across the country. Presented here is a sample of a wider research activity carried out between July 2016 and June 2018, and currently being finalised, the Catalogue of Landscape Typologies is based on a photographic campaign carried out along the main historical itineraries in the country. Four hundred selected views were classified and redrawn to identify recurring features and visual regularities pertaining to the horizon line, urbanized area, vegetation, and morphological formations. The contemporary condition of the Albanian landscape is then compared to that of the pre-urban planning period, specifically the early twentieth century when the *Società Geografica Italiana* dispatched important Italian scholars and geographers to study such pristine territory decades before the military occupation. First, there is a focus on the organisation of the Albanian landscape before the modernist planning; second, elements of Italian reports at the turn of the century are analysed; finally, a framework for a preliminary catalogue of the Albanian landscape is provided. As explained in other publications,¹ operative mapping is a much-needed tool to devise strategies on a territory that is changing at an accelerated pace under the pressure of tourism and urbanisation. In 1991, the government decided to nullify old property claims to reset previously nationalized lands under the socialist regime. Indeed, Albania was the sole nation in central Western Europe that completed the process of nationalization of the whole arable land. According to the *Albania Land Distribution and Agricultural Organization* report at the Library of Congress Country Studies, there have been three legal forms of agricultural production since 1967 collectivisation: state farms, collective farms, and individual plots granted to collective farm members. This anti-nationalisation reaction shaped a new geography of highly partitioned fields and widespread informality. In turn, informal urbanization reduced the drainage capacity of specific areas. The entire plain south of Shkoder and up to Velipoje, for instance, has seen an increase in informal building activity and a corresponding reduction in riparian vegetation. This caused an increased frequency with which the plain is completely flooded.² On the other hand, the recent surge of international tourism has affected the conservation and protection of the natural and cultural heritage.³ The final objective of the catalogue is not to express qualitative judgments on the landscape but to highlight the specificity of places, giving importance to their visual character. The interpretation of the vistas is then essential to elaborate analysis and propose comparative studies.

1 Giuseppe Resta, *Atlante di progetti per l'Albania. La città e il territorio nel primo Novecento*, Mosaico (Melfi: Libria, 2019); Loris Rossi, Laura Pedata, Enrico Porfido and Giuseppe Resta, "Fragile Edges and Floating Strategies along the Albanian Coastline," *The Plan Journal* 2, no.2 (2017): 685–705, doi: <https://doi.org/10.15274/tpj.2017.02.02.22>.

2 Ministry of Tourism and Environment and Shkodër Prefecture, "Flood Risk Management Plan, Shkodër region", (Shkodër: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2015)

3 Ministry of Tourism and Environment, "National strategy for sustainable tourism development 2019–2023", (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2019)

Albanian landscape under the Ottoman Empire

Starting with the 1912 declaration of independence and international recognition of national borders,⁴ Albania's twentieth century saw a succession of autocratic regimes: the principality of Albania established in 1914, the Italian protectorate over part of the territory in 1917 and militarily occupation from 1939 to 1943, and finally Enver Hoxha's dictatorship until the 1980s. Hence, the relation between space and military power produced peculiar landscape transformations of the urban and rural territory arranged by the Ottoman Empire. The Balkans were a jumbled patchwork of feudal states under Ottoman rule. Hungary and Venice, two traditionally Christian powers, were unpopular among the native orthodox population.⁵ The Hebraic minority, which formed some prosperous and stable communities until the end of the nineteenth century, did not express any distinctive architectural culture in their settlements.⁶ Thus, until Albanian independence, the process of conquest and settlement by the Ottomans had certain constant features. Territorial expansion was associated with a coherent narrative to sustain the ideology of a religious war. Spatial appropriation maintained an accurate balance of offensive and defensive actions between central power and local actions.⁷ The Balkan ruling aristocracy was weak, with an army too limited to defeat the Turks. The latter decided to establish tribute states and protectorates, with a direct influence on the local rulers, reducing the need for formal conquest. Finally, the conquest had to pay for itself and offered revenue and a certain degree of freedom for adventurers.⁸ After a brief period of resistance against the invading Ottomans, local aristocratic landowners "progressively accepted vassalage under the sultans",⁹ to be incorporated into a new system of land organisation. In the North, the "direct Ottoman control was minimal because of extremely rugged terrain", while "less mountainous central and southern Albania experienced a more direct and continuous Ottoman presence".¹⁰ Hence, Albanian mountains had a fundamental role in organizing the territory, and the river basins served as linear structures for settlements. The small strip of flatlands at the mouth of rivers consisted of swamps and lagoons, and the process of remediation began with the Italian occupation.

4 Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars, 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War* (London–New York: Routledge, 2000)

5 Halil İnalcık, Suraiya Faroqhi and Donald Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

6 Maurice Cerasi, "Vicini e vicinato – la psicologia degli insediamenti sefarditi," in *Sefarad. Architettura e urbanistica ebraiche dopo il 1492*, ed. Attilio Petruccioli (Como: Dell'Oca, 1992), 36–49.

7 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds. 2 vols. Vol. II. (Berkeley–London: University of California Press. Original edition, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 1972)

8 Paul Q. Hirst, *Space and power: politics, war and architecture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005)

9 Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans from Constantinople to Communism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) : 153.

10 Hupchick, *The Balkans from Constantinople to Communism*, 152.



[Fig. 1]
 Map of Baldacci_s itineraries
 (Baldacci A, Itinerari albanesi (1892-1902))

Landscape explorations of post-Ottoman Albania

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albania became a possible land of conquest for Italy, France, and Austria. Explorations and surveys of the newly liberated territory involved numerous scientific and military expeditions. At the end of the nineteenth century, the *Reale Società Geografica Italiana* had been carrying out a systematic study of Albanian landscape, mainly aimed at geographical research.¹¹ Relevant Italian scholars and geographers travelled to Tirana and Valona. Antonio Baldacci (1867–1950) between 1892 and 1902, Roberto Almagià (1884–1962), Aldo Sestini (1904–1988) in 1940, Bruno Castiglioni (1898–1945) who recorded geomorphological aspects as an army officer following Italian troops. Two expeditions in 1940 allowed them to collect all the information needed to publish the fundamental monograph "L'Albania", printed in 1943. Bruno Castiglioni oversaw the geomorphological aspects of the study, Ferdinando Milone covered anthropology and economics, and Aldo Sestini investigated the geographical features of each region.¹² Another landmark contribution is Antonio Baldacci's *Itinerari albanesi: (1892–1902)*, which described discovering an obscure land, its natural features and the built environment. The Bolognese geographer and botanist dedicated more than fifty years of his life to the study of the Balkans, trying to accompany his scientific reports with narrative strands, where the scientist established empathy with places and their population (Fig. 1). For this reason, we maintain, Baldacci's accounts were accessible to the wider Italian and international public. They contributed to raising an interest around that obscure land on the other side of the Adriatic Sea. He wrote in 1916 that it was time to lift the veil of mystery that had "covered Albania's virginity".¹³

A vivid description of mountains is the main *topos* in Baldacci's work.¹⁴ They have imposing masses to which human settlements must adapt and live in isolation. In the north is "the horrid alpine corrugation, within which the ill-fated tribes settle with their scattered villages in the gorges of the mountains".¹⁵ The traveller/scientist's loneliness is noticeable, as he is forced to elaborate his relationship with the chaotic and wild nature of the place beyond his duty, without the ability to maintain the detached and rigorous attitude that any scientific expedition would impose. The emotional impact of the Albanian scenery transformed Baldacci into a narrator of the sublime, embedded with the landscape he studied, in which he reached interesting

11 Giuseppe Resta, *Atlante di progetti per l'Albania. La città e il territorio nel primo Novecento*, Mosaico (Melfi: Libria, 2019)

12 Bruno Castiglioni, Ferdinando Milone and Aldo Sestini, *L'Albania* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1943)

13 Antonio Baldacci, "L'Albania", in *Bollettino della Reale Società Geografica Italiana*, no. 5 (1916): 5.

14 Donato Martucci and Rita Nicoli, "Ai popoli generosi dell'Albania e della Montagna Nera: Antonio Baldacci e i Balcani", *Palaver*, no2 (2013): 183–206, doi: 10.1285/i22804250v2p183.

15 Antonio Baldacci, *Itinerari albanesi (1892–1902): Con uno sguardo generale all'Albania e alle sue comunicazioni stradali*. 1 vols. (Roma: Reale Società Geografica Italiana, 1917), 2.

moments of introspection.¹⁶ The landscape he saw is not domesticated; wherever he walks, he stings his “feet on the sharp tip of the rocks, which follow one another on a seamless land, with the danger of falling and never getting up again”.¹⁷ The Bolognese geographer described his powerlessness in a harsh and rough land. His exploration of Albania, at times, departed the realm of reality to become an investigation of the self.

Another recurring element in Italian reports of post-Ottoman Albanian landscape is torrential rivers. In the 1890s, after the construction of the first hydraulic power plants, the possibility to exploit waterways for energy production changed the perception of river valleys: from pleasant natural features, they became possible “electric landscapes”. Albanian water bodies are impetuous and therefore intended as an essential resource for urbanized areas. Physician Stefano Santucci was appointed, among others, by the International Commission of Control established after the London Treaty to report on the northern border of the country. His notes covered the road system, physical and medical geography, population life, customs, and traditions, potential future commercial links, and pathology distribution. In the 1914 expedition, “the course of this river [Zem] and the valley are truly picturesque, as they offer wonderful views from wherever they look: mountains plunging down the river, frequent waterfalls running through woods, and voluminous streams that flow from the adjacent mountains”¹⁸ he wrote. Hence, “numerous factories could be built, powered by the electricity generated by the Seltse falls”.¹⁹

A tentative catalogue of Albanian Landscape Typologies

After one century, as mentioned, the Albanian landscape saw a period of complete nationalisation and one of extreme privatization. In these frames, the author conducts a photographic campaign along the same itineraries covered by the aforementioned geographers, discovering similarities and differences with the contemporary Albanian landscape. Tourism-related activities have altered the scenery of the coast, particularly the so-called Riviera that connects Vlorë with Sarandë, while other sectors of the northern mainland have remained relatively unchanged. Certain locations can be recognized simply by the shape of the horizon line, such as the fortified rock that overlooks Berat or the Mat River valley against the backdrop of Miloti. The coast in Porto Palermo has remained almost unchanged since it was used for military purposes in the previous century. In the Drin valley, the socialist collectivization of fields fragmented agricultural

16 Martucci and Nicoli, “Ai popoli generosi dell’Albania e della Montagna Nera: Antonio Baldacci e i Balcani” (2013).

17 Antonio Baldacci, “Nel paese del Cem: viaggi di esplorazione nel Montenegro orientale e sulle Alpi albanesi: itinerari del 1900–1901–1902” (Roma: Società geografica italiana, 1903): 53.

18 Stefano Santucci, “Un viaggio nell’Albania settentrionale”, in *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, no. 5 (1916): 666.

19 Santucci, “Un viaggio nell’Albania settentrionale”, 822.

land. Additionally, fear of a Western military attack led to the extensive installation of mushroom bunkers and other military facilities under Enver Hoxha's dictatorship. Contemporary Albania and other countries in the Balkans are rapidly changing the quality of its built environment in an attempt to emerge and progress towards the European standards. On the other hand, one could argue that unique views can be lost along the way.

This ongoing research is expected to inform a general catalogue of Albanian landscapes (Fig. 2, 3 and 4), intended as a tool for planning future interventions across the country. The catalogue could be a useful tool to build an alternative visual cartography. The Catalogue of Landscape Typologies, presented here as a work in progress sample, collects four hundred geolocated shots of selected views taken between July 2016 and June 2018, which have been classified and redrawn to identify recurring features and visual landmarks. Images are being disassembled in coherent morphological layers: woods, agricultural plains, cultivated slopes, spontaneous vegetation fields, urbanization areas, water bodies and the profile of the mountains.

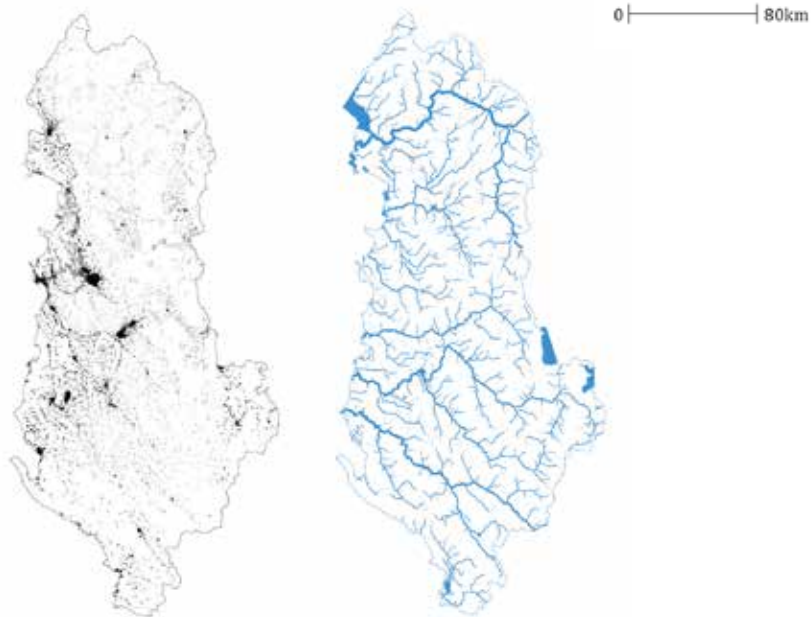
The European Landscape Convention, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 19 July 2000, sanctioned the need to classify and recognize a legal status for landscapes. One interesting effort to look at is the Landscape Catalogues of Catalonia elaborated by the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia,²⁰ which identified 135 different typologies. Patterns in landscape also express how the urban is related to the rural. The border is blurred and changeable. This is especially true in the Mediterranean, where the city emerges from the countryside rather than the other way around, as Maurice Aymard²¹ pointed out. Where the territory is a projection of the organizational model of the city. When cities are first drawn by planners' hands, the countryside develops into an "organized territory".²² In the near future, the challenge will be to reconcile the unique qualities of the Albanian landscape with a national modernization process.

20 Joan Nogué, Pere Sala and Jordi Grau, *The Landscape Catalogues of Catalonia. Methodology* (Olot: Landscape Observatory of Catalonia, 2016)

21 Maurice Aymard, "Spazi", in *Il Mediterraneo: Lo spazio, la storia, gli uomini, le tradizioni*, ed. Fernand Braudel (Milano: Bompiani, 1993; Original edition, 1985), 123–144.

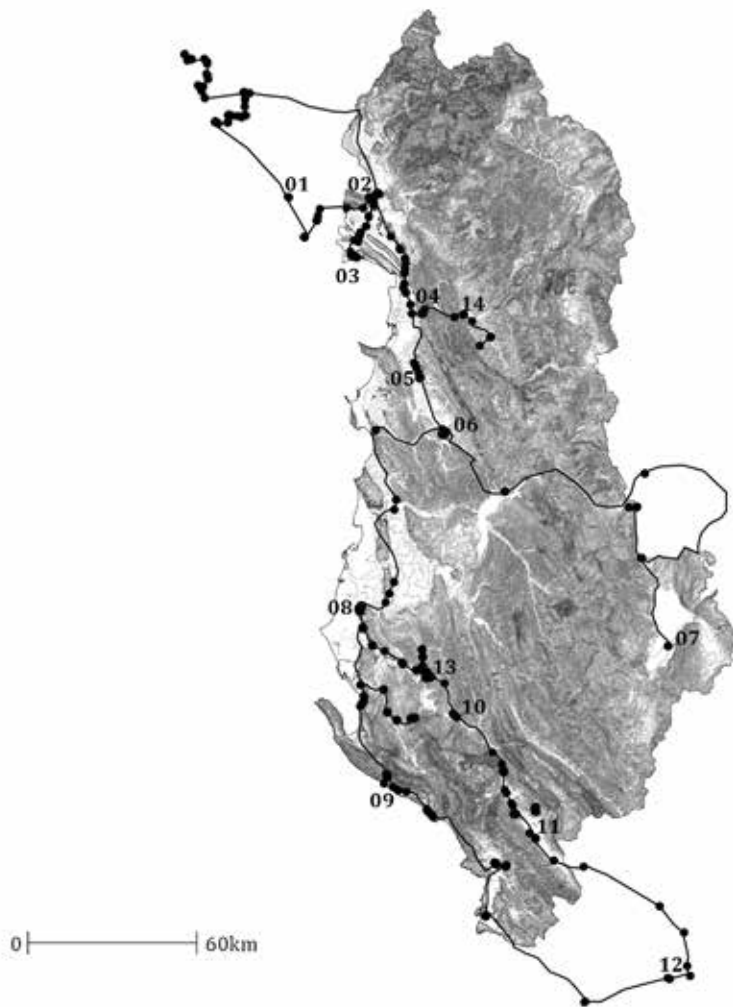
22 Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977; original edition, 1967; reprint, 2016)

All of the issues imposed in the introduction are complex and involve multiple stakeholders. The catalogue can help to inform policies and future projects by providing a better understanding of landscape. In this sense, the activity of redrawing photography can be used regularly to record alterations and propose possible visual scenarios.



[Fig. 2]
Catalogue of Albanian Landscapes

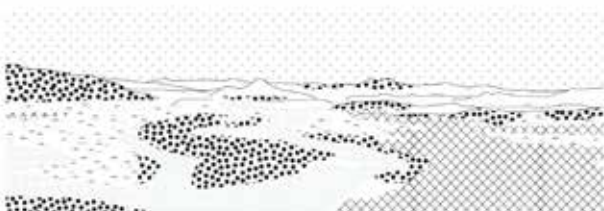
[Fig. 3]
Catalogue of Albanian Landscapes



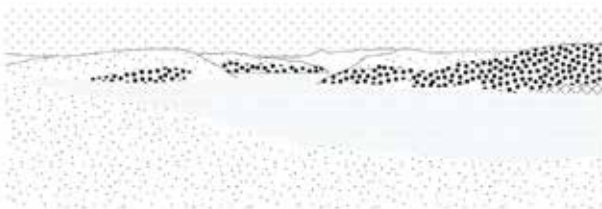
[Fig. 4]
Catalogue of Albanian Landscapes



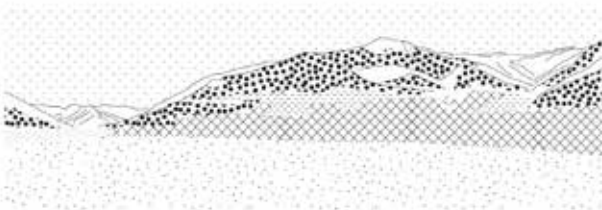
01. Antivari (Bar)
Time: February 16, 17:18
Direction: North-West
Elevation: 1m
42°03'03.4"N 19°07'47.7"E



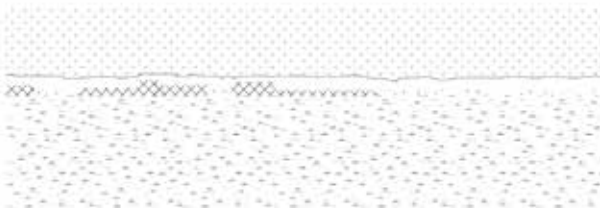
02. Shkoder
Time: February 16, 09:35
Direction: South-West
Elevation: 163m
42°02'43.9"N 19°29'31.7"E



03. Buna floodplain
Time: February 16, 10:44
Direction: North
Elevation: 78m
41°54'43.3"N 19°26'11.3"E



04. Mat valley in Miloti
Time: June 24, 15:13
Direction: North-East
Elevation: 56m
41°40'58.6"N 19°42'41.1"E



05. Ishëm floodplain
Time: February 16, 08:07
Direction: West
Elevation: 58m
41°31'15.2"N 19°41'15.6"E



06. Tirana
Time: April 8, 11:09
Direction: North-East
Elevation: 361m
41°17'44.0"N 19°48'32.4"E

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