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THE HIGH WALL AND THE NARROW GATE:  
ALBANIAN BORDERS AT THE MARGINS OF EUROPE

*Gilles de Rapper*

My paper is an attempt to understand the impact of changes in the borderland between Greece and Albanian after 1991. More precisely, I would like to relate the recent success of some “ideas” about the ancient past of the area with the state of social relations between Albanians and Greeks as experienced by local inhabitants of the borderland. Established in 1913 as a boundary between two national states, the Greek-Albanian border came to separate two geopolitical camps during the Cold War and became an external border of Europe in 1981 when Greece joined the European Community. Its ‘global’ function (Balibar 2005: 126) was however mostly activated after 1991, when huge numbers of Albanian migrant workers crossed the border and entered Greece. It is now a gate into Europe for many migrants and, as such, it is a part of the ‘Fortress Europe’.

In the first part of the paper, I will use the story of a border crossing as a starting point. This story reveals central features of the border and of how it works, between the local and the global level. The borderland appears as a place of fluidity and fragmentation, where ambiguity is produced; but also as a place where economic inequality and political domination are experienced in everyday life. From this starting point I will then address one of the issues suggested in this workshop, concerning the reversion to ancient past, through the example of what can be called the ‘return of the Pelasgians’ as ancestors of modern Albanians. The argument is that the vitality of the Pelasgic theory since the mid ‘90s is closely connected to the new situation created across the border. It can be seen as both a product and a producer of ambiguity in the borderland and as a response to new social relations across the border. My paper is thus an attempt to assess the role of social relations in “imagination” and the production of “ideas” (Godelier 1984).

The story was told me in 2001 by a man from the city of Gjirokastër, in Albania. We'll call him Mr. A. This story happened to him in Greece in 1994. Having no news from his son, migrant in Greece, for several months, Mr. A decided to go and look for him. He got a one-month tourist visa from the Greek consulate in Gjirokastër. He says he could not get a longer visa because he is a Muslim. As a Christian, he would have had a one-year or five-year visa. He was arrested by the police in Athens after one month of unsuccessful search.

"I was not ill-treated," he said, "but I was wondering why they arrested me: I am neither Black nor Arab, and I was doing nothing wrong. There was a map on the wall of the office, in the police station; the policeman asked me to show him on the map where the border was, according to me: in Arta or on the Shkumbin?"

Let's have a look at the map: here is the actual border between Greece and Albania. Arta is a city in north-western Greece. It is known to be the southern limit of Albanian nationalists' claims on Greek territory in Epirus. These claims are part of what is known as the 'Cham question', one of the issues which contribute to make the Greek-Albanian border a sensitive one. The region between the border and Arta is considered by Albanians as 'national soil' that was given to Greece in 1913 when the border was drawn. The Muslim inhabitants of the region, or Muslim Chams, were later expelled from Greece, at the end of the Second World War. The Albanian government, pressed by the Chams living in Albania, would like to discuss the issue with Greece, especially regarding financial compensation for lost properties, but Greece considers the question closed.

By answering "Arta," the name of a Greek town claimed by Albanian nationalists, Mr. A was presenting himself as a nationalist, a supporter of the Cham question, and was thus taking the risk of being classified with the less wanted Albanian visitors in Greece.

The other answer proposed by the policeman, the river Shkumbin, appears as the opposite of the first one. The river Shkumbin is the northern boundary of Northern Epirus, which is the name given in Greece to Southern Albania as a part of Epirus, a Greek land unduly attributed to Albania in 1913. According to Greek nationalists, Northern Epirus is inhabited by Greeks. Albanians oppose this version stating that Greeks in Albania live in limited areas in a couple of districts. All other inhabitants of Southern Albania are Albanian, either Muslim or Christian. These claims on 'Northern Epirus' are still considered by many Albanians as a serious threat on national territory and integrity. The Greek minority in Albania is thus another contested issue between the two countries.

By answering "Shkumbin," the northern border of Northern Epirus claimed by Greeks, Mr. A had a chance of being classified as a member of the Greek minority in Albania, for whom it is possible to go and work in Greece: they enjoy a privileged access to Greece.

The answer he actually gave to the policeman – or says he actually gave – illustrates the use that can be made of the border ambiguity, of the fact that, whatever the state control on the border may be, the border is unable to separate what cannot be separated:

“I told him,” he said, “that the Greek and the Albanian languages have 2,000 words in common. I told him that Northern Epirus exists, but it is neither Greek nor Albanian; Northern Epirus has been a multiethnic state.”

According to him, this means that the question of the border is not a question of being Greek or Albanian, that it is artificial and imposed from above to a “multiethnic” reality in which all groups, including the Muslim – to which he himself belongs – should have the same rights. In the course of the discussion, Mr. A explained me that in ancient times, before Muslims and Christians started to fight, the whole area practised a common pagan religion. He explained that even later in history the border was not a barrier between nations as it is today: his own father, a Muslim from Albania, spoke Greek and used to trade on the Greek side.

Why is this story worth being told? Mr. A’s arrest in Athens illustrates the unequal relation between both sides of the border: for many Albanians, the experience of Europe is an experience of Greece and it is made of inequality. Economic inequality, as the Greek-Albanian border is a part of the global division of labour: cheap workforce is exported from Albania to Greece, while agricultural products, manufactured goods and services cross the border from Greece to Albania. And political inequality: as a member state of EU and NATO, Greece enjoys a much better position in bilateral and international relations.

The story is also illustrative of the overlapping of local and global functions of the border: the policeman is part of the global function – his duty is to control illegal immigration into EU – but he immediately refers to the local one, by asking a question relating to the way the border divides Greece and Albania.

The role of maps in that story is to be noticed: the map is a medium between Mr. A and the policeman. It expresses opposed representations of national spaces which are nonetheless known by both interlocutors. Both share a common knowledge of what place-names like Arta and Shkumbin actually mean.

Finally, there is the reference to ancient history: Albanian and Greek languages share 2,000 words, Epirus used to be a state, the whole borderland used to be pagan. Mr. A later adds that his village of origin<sup>1</sup> has ‘Pelagic walls’. It is this vision of the past centred on the myth of the Pelagic ancestors that I would like to question now.

I would like to argue that the new uses of the border by Albanians and the re-appropriation of the borderland by local population in the ‘90s came together with a

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<sup>1</sup> Zhulat. Cf. Pilika 2005.

rewriting of ancient history which reflects both the state of relations between Greeks and Albanians and the way the latter envision their European future and identity. In other words, I would like to show that the production of a trans-border or transnational space in the present has a counterpart in the rewriting or reinvention of ancient history. The official history inherited from the communist period states that modern Albanians descend from the Illyrians, an ancient population living in Western Balkans, north of the Greek world. A large part of the historians' and anthropologists' task was to demonstrate the continuity from Illyrians to modern Albanians and also to assert the specificity of Illyrians – different from the Greeks – and the existence of a clear boundary between the two populations (Cabanes 1987; 2004). Such a conception of the past was legitimising the existence of the international border in the present.

It seems that the Illyrians as official ancestors of modern Albanians are challenged nowadays by more ancient and prestigious (although less known) ancestors, the Pelasgians. The Pelasgians are known by ancient Greek historians as the first inhabitants of Greece who were later replaced by Hellenes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a theory appeared that stated that both Albanians and Greeks (together with other populations in the Balkans and Asia Minor) were descending from the Pelasgians (Sigalas 2001). It did not resist however the nationalist need for unique ancestors for each modern nation and the Pelasgians were later forgotten or at least left aside official history. It is true that archaeological and linguistic evidence related to the Pelasgians are very meagre compared to what is known of the Illyrians, which is already quite fragmentary, specially regarding Illyrian-Albanian continuity (Wilkes 1992). Although Enver Hoxha himself supported the Pelasgic theory in his own writings, the directions he gave to Albanian archaeologists at the end of the '60s focused on the Illyrians and on the Illyrian-Albanian continuity (Cabanes 2004: 119). The Pelasgians are nonetheless coming back today. Lots of publications by amateur historians are revitalising the Pelasgic theory, sometimes relying on works published outside Albania, such as Robert d'Angely's or Mathieu Aref's books (d'Angely 1998, published in French in 1990-1991; Aref 2003, Albanian translation published in 2007).<sup>2</sup> In these theories, modern Albanians are direct descendants, through the Illyrians, of the ancient Pelasgians, considered as the founders of the most ancient civilisation in Europe. The Albanian language is presented as the only living testimony of the Pelasgic language. Greeks are also the heirs of the Pelasgians, although in a less direct way. Greek civilisation is said to be the result of 'oriental' influences (especially Egyptian) on the Pelasgic background.

Needless to say, these "theories" do not resist any critical assessment based on historical, archaeological or linguistic evidence. What is at stake is not scientific knowledge. One of the implications of the Pelasgic theories is to link, from the very beginning, Albanians and Greeks. It is in a way a response to the exclusion felt by Albanians in Greece. It is interesting to note that the revitalisation of the Pelasgians relies on works written by Arvanite amateur historians, such as the book of Aristide Kollias on "Arvanites and the origin of Greeks", whose attempts were to evidence that the Albanian presence in

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<sup>2</sup> Robert d'Angely (1893-1966) visited Albania in his childhood and later married an Albanian woman from Përmet. Mathieu Aref was born (1938) in Egypt from Albanian parents who had emigrated from Northern Albania.

Greece goes back as far as prehistory (Kolia 2002, first published in Greek in 1983). These ideas legitimise the presence of Albanians in Greece and give them a decisive role in the development of ancient Greek civilisation and later on the creation of the modern Greek state, in contrast with the general negative image of Albanians in contemporary Greek society. The advantages of the Pelasgic theories go beyond the recognition of common ancestry linking modern Albanians to modern Greeks. They state that the Pelasgians were spread all over Europe and the Mediterranean: according to those authors, all ancient civilisations in Europe (Greek, Roman, Etruscan, etc.) stemmed from the Pelasgic civilisation. They were the first Europeans; their direct descendants, the Albanians, are thus the most ancient and most authentically European people (Kokalari 2001: 14; Aref 2003: 22). And this, they say, should be considered by the EU: there is no reason to exclude Albanians from Europe; on the contrary, they *are* Europe.

Another point must be mentioned, related to regional belonging. The production of a transnational space and the rewriting of an inclusive history in which all Europeans are the descendants of the Pelasgians are closely related to the revitalisation of regional belonging in Albania. During the '90s many "cultural and patriotic societies," as they are called, were created in most of the small regions which form Southern Albania. These claims for regional identities are generally turned towards the past, although some of them include projects of local development through tourism. Discussions about ancient history are common among these societies. There are favoured by the existence, on both sides of the border, of a number of more or less well-known archaeological sites, such as Butrint in Albania or Dodona in Greece. For instance, in Lunxhëri, a small region facing the town of Gjirokastër, the local association is devoted to the collect of traditions, old songs and folk tales; it is also interested in the origin and ancient history of the region. In August 1991, on the occasion of an annual celebration of a Second World War event, I was told many stories on the ancient past of the area by a school teacher, a vet and a (Muslim) painter of icons. Most of what they told me was inspired by the reading of a best-seller of that time, the translation of parts of Robert d'Angely's book on the Pelasgians. The "myth of origin" of Lunxhëri as it is promoted by the Society refers to the ancient city of Antigoneia. This archaeological site was discovered and identified in the '60s as a city built by Pirrhus, king of Epirus. In local history, the villages of Lunxhëri were created as a consequence of the destruction of the city by the Romans in 168 BC: the inhabitants of Antigoneia left the city and settled in the hills nearby. Today's Lunxhëri are thus direct descendants of the local Illyrian tribe, the Chaonians (Bërsholi 2007: 57-58, 155-162). As such, they are also Pelasgians. In 2002 an article written by the historian Zija Shkodra was published in the daily press under the title 'Pelasgic Lunxhëri' (Shkodra 2002). It circulated among the inhabitants of the region and was largely commented. In 2005 Antigoneia was granted the status of 'archaeological park'. Local authorities and inhabitants are expecting repercussions on tourism and local economy.

To conclude I would like to suggest that the vitality of the Pelasgic myth of origin is a direct consequence of what is going on on the border and of the new state of relations between Greece and Albania, and between Albania and Europe. We are witnessing a re-

appropriation of the border, once a forbidden zone, by local people through practices and representations of space and history. Although the end of communism has been a time of disambiguation of the past and of rewriting of history, like in other countries, the re-appropriation of the borderland rather suggests a production of ambiguity. The blurring of ethnic and national boundaries between Greeks and Albanians through the myth of common Pelasgic origin can be seen as an answer, on the imaginary level, to the difficult crossing of the actual international border (as a high wall protecting Fortress Europe) through the narrow gate of legal migration. There is a striking symmetry between the production of transnationalism between Greece and Albania – of which the Albanian migrant is the most visible figure – on the one hand, and the reinvention of the Pelasgians as ‘transnational ancestors’ of both Albanians and Greeks, at least from the Albanian point of view. It is a response to exclusion, which is itself both inclusive and exclusive: the Pelasgians are the ancestors of all Europeans, but only Albanians are their direct and authentic descendants. The Pelasgic theories are also a response to exclusion from Europe: they are a claim for a kind of absolute autochthony in Europe.

Finally, the return of the Pelasgians is an illustration of a well-known paradox in the anthropology of globalisation: faced with the difficulties induced by modernity, local people participate in the symbolic reconstruction of community through imagination and reversion to tradition and ancient past (Abélès 2008: 205). We are thus reminded that representations reflect the reality of social relations and that imagination plays a part in the reproduction of society, through the use of symbols (Godelier 2007).

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