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PRE ROMAN SETTLEMENTS AND COMMUNITIES IN THE HINTERLAND OF LISSOS

Abstract: Three new sites — Kallmet, Ungrej and Vrith — have been surveyed and documented by the joint Albanian-Polish archaeological project in the hinterland of Scodra and Lissos. They resemble already known fortified places in the territory of the Labeates. At Kallmet, a long rubble wall has been traced, at Vrith it is a series of dry masonry walls, and at Ungrej a line of defense walls. This last site can be identified as a Hellenistic fortress, probably guarding the hinterland of Lissos, whereas Vrith may have been a pastoral site; Kallmet is difficult to interpret for lack of additional evidence. An overview of the new data permits a revisiting of several issues concerning the territorial extent of Lissos itself and the chief groups of Illyrians, the Labeates included, populating the hinterland of this city in the Hellenistic period.

First and foremost, a contextualizing of the archaeological data coming from a larger territory, that is, extending to the Black Drin valley, contrasts the Lissos hinterland with its mosaic of small communities living in not necessarily fortified settlements of limited size, with a densely urbanized coastal area. Second, a closer look at the terminology used by ancient authors with regard to Illyrian sites — mainly *urb*, *oppidum* and *castellum* — reveals an unfamiliarity with the urban realities of Illyria, this because archaeological facts often fail to bear out the terminology. Last but not least, there is the issue of the location and extent of the tribal territories of the Pirustae and Cavii, both with documented ties to Lissos.

All in all, marshalling the archaeological data alongside information to be gleaned from historical accounts has brought new insights into the geographical history of the area, as well as the political and territorial organization of the Illyrians in this region.

Keywords: Illyria, Labeates, Cavii, Pirustae, Scodra, Lissos, landscape archaeology, *urbs*, *castella*, *arcibus*

Lissos and its territory during the Hellenistic period

The territorial extent of Lissos during the fourth – first centuries BC is not easy to reconstruct with so little being known about it from ancient historical accounts [Fig. 1]. These tend to recognize the political dominance of the Labeates in the region, but this conception could very well be a veil for the actual fragmentation of the territory and the communities inhabiting it, the details of which may have escaped the attention of ancient authors. Pliny's¹ recalling of a fading memory of the Enderini, Sasaei, and Grabaei once resident in the region may constitute a vague reference to local communities fragmented in such a way.

¹ PLINY, III, 22.



Fig. 1. The region with the main sites and tribes mentioned in the text (S. Shpuza)

Unlike Scodra and Medeon, Lissos is never mentioned explicitly as a city of the Labeates.² Neither its municipal status nor the limits of its territory at the end of the fourth century BC are known and the dark ages continue through the end of the third century BC. This period, especially the last quarter of the third century BC, is marked by a series of important political and military events, and in particular, the Illyrian-Roman wars (229 and 219 BC) and the conquest of the city by Philip V of Macedonia (213 BC). Polybius' detailed account of the war suggests that its consequences would have also had an effect on other cities and communities around Lissos.³ Whatever the case may be, in the first half of the second century BC Lissos is, alongside Scodra, a seat of King Genthius⁴ and, like Scodra, is minting coins in the king's name.⁵

² See SHPUZA 2017, p. 43; Scodra and Medeon are mentioned by LIVY (XLIV, 31,2 and XLIV, 23,3 respectively).

³ POLYBIUS VIII, 13, 1, 3, 4, 8; 14, 8, 9.

⁴ LIVY XLIII, 20,2; XLIV, 30, 6.

⁵ META 2020 with bibliography.

⁶ POLYBIUS II, 12, 3; III, 16, 3; APPIAN, *Illyrike*, 7.

Despite the changeable political context, the collected geographical and historical data give insight into the extent of the immediate territory of Lissos, which would have been at the core of the city's development during the Hellenistic period. The frontier-zone character of this land is intimated in several ancient sources from different periods. After the first Illyrian-Roman War, the city is mentioned as the southern maritime border of the reduced Illyrian Kingdom of Teuta.⁶ Genthios' military campaigns against the Cavii and Bassania issued from Lissos.⁷ With the establishment of Roman provincial administration, the city became the southern border of the province of Dalmatia.⁸ In the Late Antique provincial administration, it was the southern city of the province of Praevalis. In view of this it is not surprising that the main north — south road from Dyrrachion to Scodra passed inside the Hellenistic defense circuit,⁹ creating a border checkpoint with an economically important role of a probable "transit tax" collector.¹⁰

Traditionally, the southern border of Lissos territory is set on the Mat river. The Mathis, as the river is known in the fourth-century-AD *Vibius Sequester*, constitutes the northern limit of the territory of Dyrrachium during the Roman period.¹¹ Throughout Hellenistic times it formed a natural boundary between the territory of Lissos (and, on a larger scale, that of the Labeates) and that of the Parthini tribe. The border with the Parthini is indirectly confirmed by Pliny¹² and Caesar.¹³ The Parthini seem to have inherited the territory of the Taulanti, who had occupied the hinterlands of Dyrrachium and Apollonia,¹⁴ as well as a large part of the Shkumbini valley. After the first Illyrian-Roman war they became part of the Roman protectorate¹⁵ and were incorporated as soldiers into the Roman army¹⁶ to fight against Genthios and the Macedonians.¹⁷ A small fortress near modern Laç (Kodra e Kolikut), controlling the main road that passed nearby, marked the northern end of their territory.¹⁸ Their main city in this area, and the nearest to Lissos in the south, is Zgërdhesh.¹⁹ Its topographical layout apparently follows patterns laid down for Lissos, Bushat and Scodra in the Hellenistic period.

In the north, Lissos territory merges with that of Scodra in the plain of Zadrima. While the whole area is generally accepted as belonging to the Labeates, it is also assumed that the Drini river (ancient Oriund), the ancient riverbed of which used to cross the Zadrima plain in a northeast–southwest direction, was a natural boundary between Scodra and Lissos. The Adriatic in the west was another natural boundary. Caesar mentions the presence of a port called Nymphaion in the coastal area, situated 3000 *passum*, that is 4.5 km, from Lissos.²⁰ This harbor corresponds to the modern Shëngjin, well protected from the west and northwest but not from the south, as described by Caesar. Nymphaion would have been a secondary port for Lissos, complementing the city harbor of Lissos itself, which was situated probably just outside the lower fortifications.²¹ Last but not least, the eastern border of the territory ran through a region broken up by mountains and high hills. The mountain of Vela, east of Lissos, constitutes an important barrier, the hinterland being accessible only through high mountain passes. Here again,

⁷ LIVY XLIV, 30, 6.

⁸ PLINY III, 23; PTOLEMY II, 16, 2.

⁹ PRENDI, ZHEKU 1986, p. 59; OETTEL 2015, p. 239.

¹⁰ This appears to be a common pattern also in other Illyrian cities north of Lissos. The main road in Scodra and in Rison also appears to have passed through the city, being incorporated within the defences to better impose control over travellers and traders.

¹¹ Vibii Sequesteris, *De fluminibus, fontibus, lacuibus, nemoribus, paludibus, montibus. gentibus per litteras libellus*. B.C. Teubner, Lipsiae, 1987, 107. Cf. ANAMALI 1983, pp. 5–9; SHPUZA 2014, p. 506. It may be the same river as the Ardaxanos mentioned by POLYBIUS VIII, 13, 2 in his

description of the siege of Lissos by Philip V of Macedonia.

¹² PLINY III, 23.

¹³ CAESAR III, 42, 4.

¹⁴ STRABO VII, 5, 7; 5, 12.

¹⁵ POLYBIUS II, 11, 10.

¹⁶ CAESAR III, 11, 4.

¹⁷ LIVY XLIV, 30, 13.

¹⁸ HARTA ARKEOLOGJIKE 2008, p. 273, Fig. 1.

¹⁹ For recent archaeological research at Zgërdhesh see: MAURER, METALLA 2020.

²⁰ CAESAR III, 26, 4.

²¹ CAESAR III, 40, 4; OETTEL 2015, p. 239, Fig. 5.

according to ancient sources of the second century BC, we are dealing with, generally speaking, Labeatian territory.²²

Considering the historical geography outlined above, Lissos' chief assets seem to have been the two ports ensuring a maritime connection and control of the main road coming from Epirus in the south. Sea access seems to have been the prime reason for Philip V of Macedonia attacking the city, his strategic interest being to gain a foothold on the Adriatic coast,²³ especially if we take into consideration Strabo's information that the river Drilon (Oriundus, Drini) was navigable up to Dardania.²⁴ This is, of course, assuming that Strabo was referring to the river in Lissos rather than the one starting from Lake Ohrid (Black Drin). In the former case, the sea harbor of Lissos, located in the delta of the Drin, would have been doubly important, being as it is the starting point for boats sailing upriver.²⁵ Had this been so, however, neither Polybius nor Caesar, both of whom give very detailed information about the topography of Lissos, would have failed to mention it.

Other economic assets of Lissos territory were constituted by pastoralism, practiced especially in the eastern regions, and agriculture in the Zadrime plain.²⁶ Caesar, however, looking to supply his army with grain in the mid-first century BC, says that the area around Lissos does not produce much wheat and most of the supply has to be imported from elsewhere.²⁷ This was probably due to the numerous marshlands in the Zadrime plain, which could still be seen on 16th and 17th-century maps of the region and the presence of which has recently been confirmed by geoarchaeological studies.²⁸ Finally, the eastern hinterland of Lissos is rich in minerals, including copper, but there is still no data about ancient mining in the area.²⁹

Archaeological findings from Lissos territory

Despite the limited nature of the archaeological data, the patterns observed in the territory around Lissos appear to resemble those of Scodra. The Late Bronze and Iron Ages are represented by burial grounds of tumuli located on mountain summits in the Kakarriqi and Renci ranges in the northwestern part of Lissos,³⁰ and the modern Kaluer and Kaftalla in the east. From the same period come the fortifications at Acrolissos³¹ and Zejmen.³² Acrolissos continued as a fortress in the Hellenistic era, the visibility from there making it a strategic outpost of supreme importance for the protection of Lissos when the city was at war.³³ Memory of this fortress must have still been strong in the beginning of the first century AD when Strabo mentions it, perhaps under the influence of Polybius' account.³⁴

More archaeological data come from the three other sites in this territory, newly investigated by an Albanian-Polish archaeological project. One of them, Kallmet, is situated in the hilly area

²² LIVY XLIII, 19, 3.

²³ This Philip V accomplished in 214 and 213 BC, taking Lissos in the north and Orikos in the south. However, his main target, Apollonia of Illyria, did not fall to him. His campaign caused the Romans to react; see DEROW, ERSKINE, CRAWLEY QUINN 2014, p. 33.

²⁴ STRABO VII, 5, 7. Anna Comnena speaks of navigation on the Drin in the 11th century, apparently referring to the part of the river near Lissos (Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, II, 12, 8.9).

²⁵ This route would have complemented the land road called the via Lissus – Naissus in Roman times.

²⁶ SHPUZA 2019, pp. 178–180.

²⁷ CAESAR III, 42, 5.

²⁸ UNCU 2012.

²⁹ Ugolini (UGOLINI 1927) reports traces of mining activity in the area of Bulgjer near the Fandi river, 15 km southeast of Lissos, but judges these to be of medieval date.

³⁰ KURTI, RUKA, GJIPALI 2014.

³¹ PRENDI, ZHEKU 1972, p. 242.

³² KURTI, RUKA 2018, pp. 150–152.

³³ POLYBIUS VIII, 13, 1; SHPUZA 2020, p. 12; see also WALBANK 2002, p. 37.

³⁴ STRABO VII, 5, 8.

northeast of Lissos, between the city and Scodra. The other two, Ungrej and Vrith, are located in the mountainous region east of Lissos.

1. Kallmet (Kodra e Kshqelit)

The local toponym for this site is Kodra e Kshqelit (The Hill of the Castle). Kshqeli represents a local transformation of the word “kështjellë”, which is the Albanian term for *castellum*. The site lies 9 km northeast of Lissos, at an altitude of 520 m asl. A 55-m-long rubble wall [Fig. 2] can be seen on the eastern hill slope, from where there is good visibility of the land all the way to the pass of Kreshta [Fig. 3]. The wall seems more regular at its northern extremity. It is built of bigger stones at a point where its width, 1.30 m, could be measured (the preserved part is of practically no height) [Fig. 4]. The limited surface pottery collection³⁵ is difficult to date except for an amphora rim and a few fragments of tiles from late antiquity. In some parts of the site the bedrock had been cut away to form paths [Fig. 5].

A similar rubble wall can be found at the site of Troshan (Kodra e Qytezës), a few kilometers north of Kallmet.³⁶ Archaeological finds have been reported from there since the beginning of the

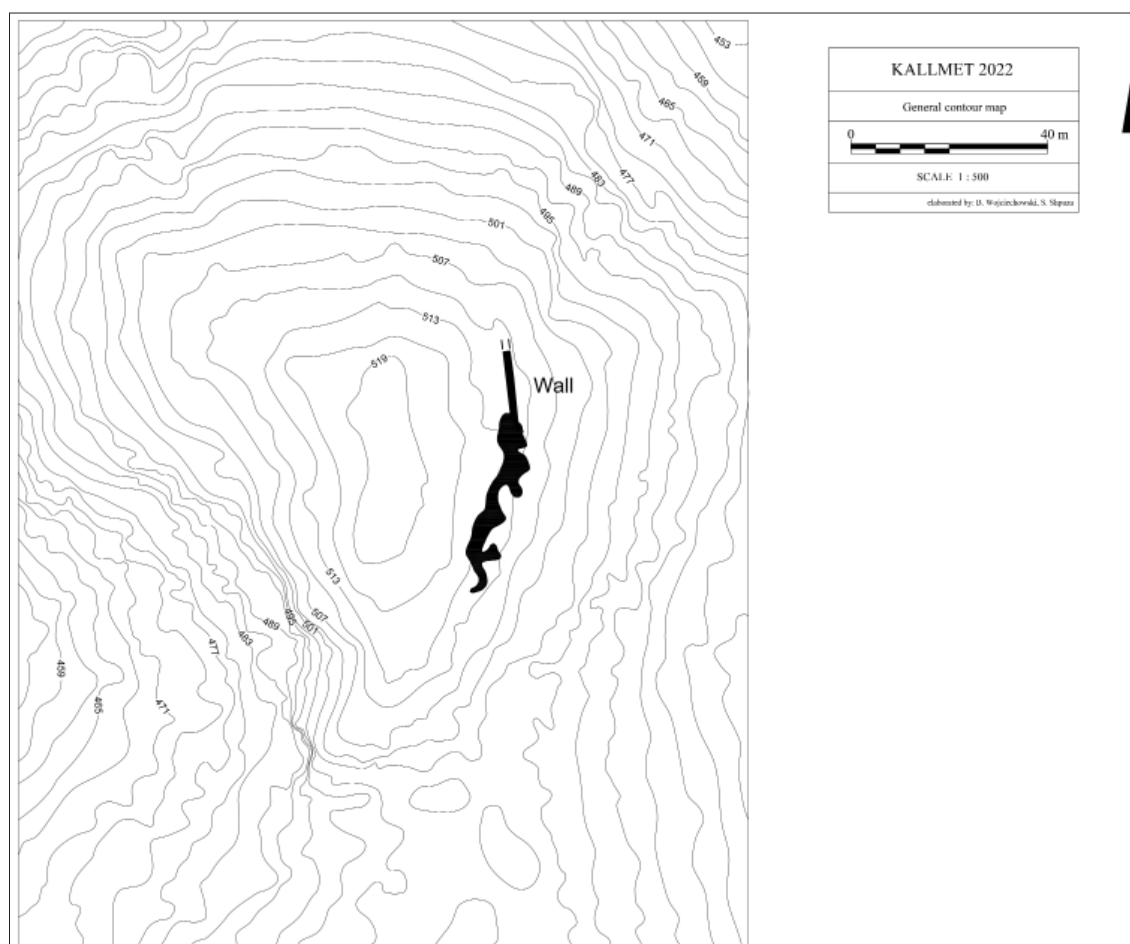




Fig. 3. Aerial view of the site at Kallmet (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 4. View of the rubble wall at Kallmet (H. Sokoli)



Fig. 5. Natural rock quarried to cut a path at Kallmet (S. Shpuza)

20th century; Shtjefën Gjeçovi noted tumuli there and conducted some excavations,³⁷ the finds from which were published also by Luigi M. Ugolini.³⁸ Frano Prendi published some weapons from the Hellenistic period found in Troshan.³⁹

The architectural remains from Kallmet and Troshan are difficult to date and of unassessed function, which is a fairly typical characteristic of a rather large network of ‘primitive’ sites commonly found in the pre-Roman landscape of Illyria.⁴⁰

³⁷ GJEÇOVI 1920.

³⁸ UGOLINI 1927, p. 31, Fig. 26.

³⁹ PRENDI 1958.

⁴⁰ Some of these “primitive” sites could have occasionally been used as surveillance posts in the Hellenistic

period (SHPUZA 2020, p. 20). Polybius (V, 7.8–9) refers to sites of this kind as *efedreia*. Their sporadic occupation is mostly related to specific military operations; see PEDECH 1964, p. 549.

2. Ungrej (Maja e Komlikut)

The fortified site is situated 665 m asl, between the villages of Fregën in the west and Ungrej in the north.⁴¹ It is completely unknown in archaeological literature because Loro Gjeçi from the Museum of Lezha, who conducted some limited excavations there in the 1980s, did not publish his findings and it is not clear what happened with the archaeological finds at the time. The surrounding mountains and the land crossed by the Dibrri stream are clearly visible from this site, extending from the mountain of Vela in the west, which separates it from Lissos and the coast, to the mountains of Mirdita in the east and the mountains of Dibër in the far southeast. The rivers Gjadri and Fani form natural river boundaries in the north and south, respectively.

The territory is poorly investigated in archaeological terms with just one excavated site, the Roman *castrum* at Vig, situated 10 km northeast of Ungrej. Ferenc Nopsca, who visited most of northern Albania, including Ungrej, in the beginning of the 20th century, published some finds from this village, including a fragment of an Illyrian helmet, a spear and a vase with two handles [Fig. 6].⁴² The finds appear to be of sixth–fifth century BC date and could very well have been grave goods from one of the tumuli at Kaluer, which is a burial ground situated 3 km to the northeast of the fortification. Nopsca also introduces the toponym *Varret e romakëvet*, which translates as “Graves of the Romans” and which could thus be an indication of a tentative Roman necropolis in the area. He makes no mention, however, of the fortification.

The complex is an irregular rectangle in shape, measuring 53 m by 40 m inside the walls, which translates into just 0.2 ha of area on the hilltop [Fig. 7]. The western section of the wall is well preserved, including a gateway, which is merely a passage in the wall, 1.80 m wide.⁴³ The wall on both sides of this apparent gate, preserved to a height of about one meter, is built of slightly larger stones compared to the rest of the standing structure [Fig. 8]. In the part running northward, it is reduced to only one row of stones and is clearly integrated in part with the bedrock [Fig. 9]. On the southward stretch of the west wall a tower was detected, its walls interbonded with the main structure, indicating that it was an integral part of the original line of defenses. Pending excavations to verify these tentative observations, the tower can be reconstructed as semicircular in shape, its maximal dimensions being 3.80 × 2.70 m [Fig. 10].

Thick rubble obscures the corner where the southern end of the west wall turns east. Picked up further on, the south wall reveals a maximum height of 0.70 m [Fig. 11]. It is built of stones of smaller size compared to those in the western section. The presence of mortar observed on a small part of this wall suggests sporadic reuse of the site in later periods [Fig. 12]. As for the rest of the defenses, only a small section of the north wall is preserved, while the course of the east wall is hypothetical in its entirety. Wall thickness could not be ascertained anywhere except for the part by the western gate, where it measured 1.40 m.

The mostly rocky ground inside the fortification preserves evidence of quarrying [Fig. 13], which could be interpreted as extraction of building material directly on site. Walls can be traced on the surface in the southern part of the enclosed area, on a lower terrace near the defenses, which is the only part of the site with depositional layers. There is reason to think that the

⁴¹ Visited by our team on 21 March 2022, in the company of Ded Margjoni and Helidon Sokoli (both from DRTK Shkodër) and the poet Tonin Ndreca.

⁴² NOPSCA 1909, p. 83. Similar vessels have been found in great quantity in the Shtoji tumuli and they seem to have a long chronology from the eighth century BC to the fifth. The one from Ungrej appears to represent a variant found in contexts from the sixth–fifth centuries BC (KOKA 1990,

p. 46, Tab. IV, 56). The helmet, now conserved in the National Museum of Bosnia and Hercegovina, represents variant IIB of Illyrian helmets and is probably of the same date as the vase, that is, the sixth or fifth century BC; see BLEČIĆ KAVUR, PRAVIDUR 2012, pp. 44–45.

⁴³ The gate in Gajtán, of uncertain date, is of similar size and form.



Fig. 6. Objects from Ungrej (after Nopsca 1909, pp. 84–85, Figs 2–5)

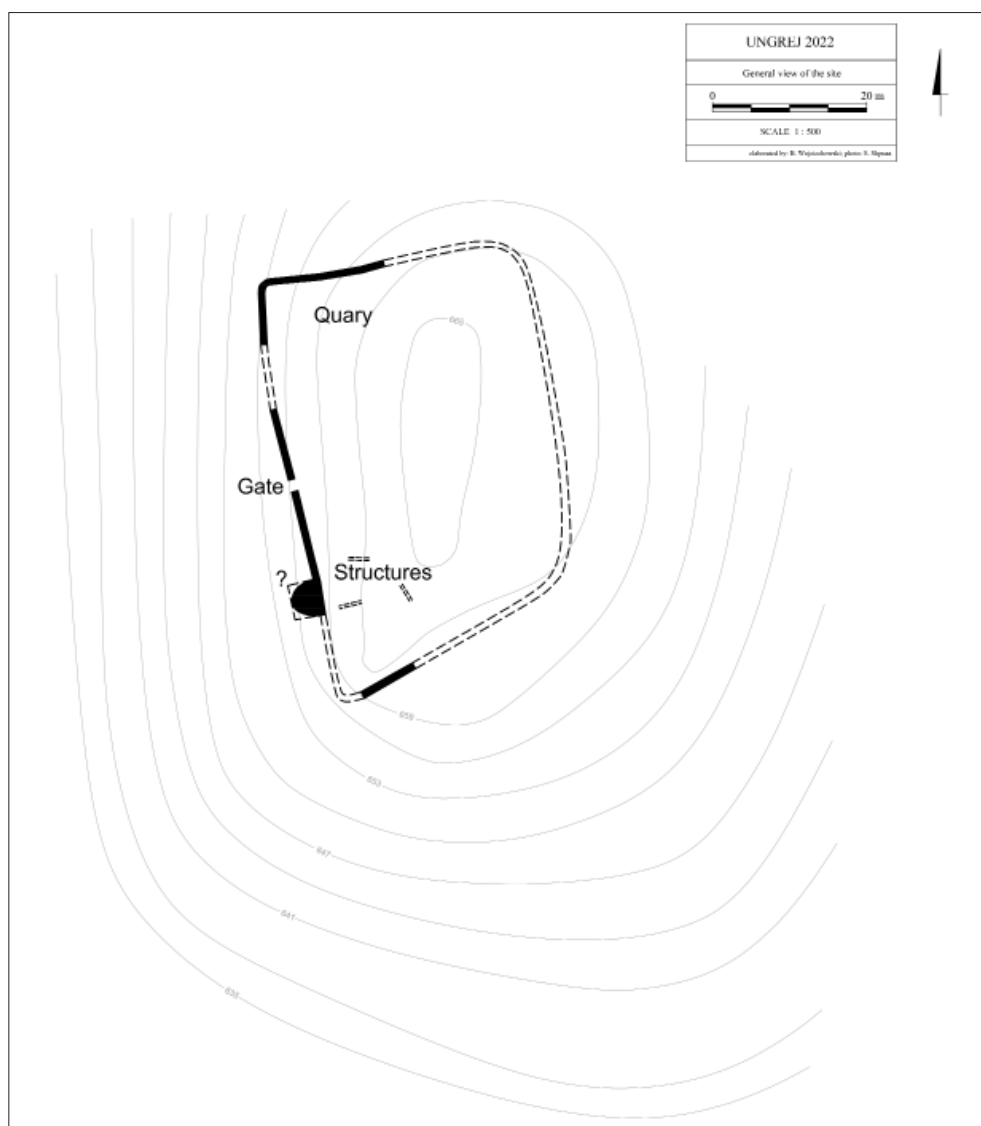


Fig. 7. Plan of the fortification at Ungrej (B. Wojciechowski, S. Shpuza)



Fig. 8. Aerial view of the gate at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 9. Natural rock incorporated into the fortification wall at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 10. Interbonding tower and fortification wall at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 11. View of the south wall at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 12. View of the south wall and traces of mortar at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 13. Traces of ancient quarrying on the summit at Ungrej (S. Shpuza)

1980s excavations carried out by the Museum of Lezha were located in this area. The walls are 0.60 m thick, but nothing much can be said about the layout. According to the local residents, there are ancient graves on the southwestern hillslope, very close to the site. Rubble walls have also been noted on the eastern slope. On the whole, these *extra-muros* finds, along with the scaled-down form of the inner fortification, tentatively suggest occupation of the surrounding area either simultaneously or in different periods.

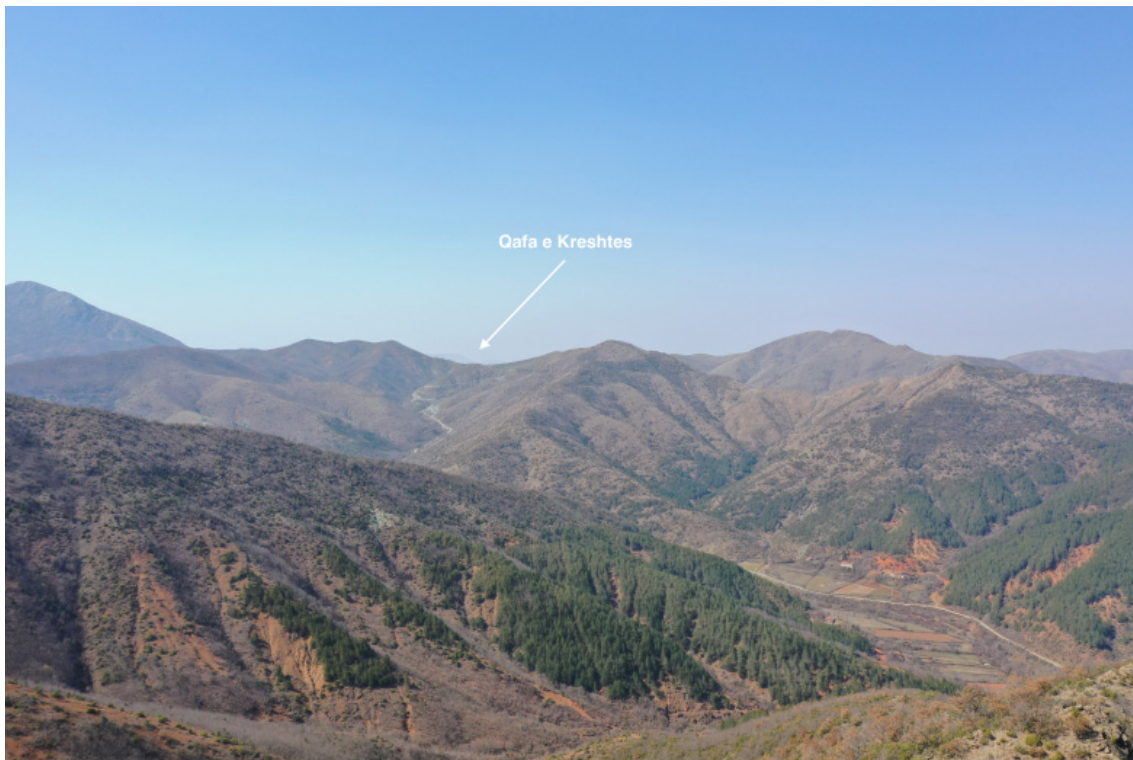


Fig. 14. Pass of Kreshta seen from Ungrej (S. Shpuza)

Beside the surface ceramic finds (very few and diagnostically inconsequential), only wall typology may provide grounds for a tentative date of this complex. A minimal dressing of building stones, classified as “rustic polygonal”,⁴⁴ and the masonry as a whole put Ungrej in line with other sites in the Shkodra region.⁴⁵ The “primitive” stone-working in this case may indeed be due to the properties of the rock in this region: ultramafic rock is rich in minerals and very hard to cut.⁴⁶ The presence of a tower is suggestive of a Hellenistic date, even if the gate itself is very simple and unprotected. All things considered, the fortification at Ungrej may be dated to the beginning of the Hellenistic period, possibly contemporaneous with the foundation of Lissos at the end of the fourth century BC.

Its role, plausibly, is that of a *phourion* with a small garrison tasked with control of the immediate hinterland of Lissos and the main roads passing through it. From Ungrej there is a clear view of the mountain pass of Kreshta (750 m asl) in the west, guarded at both ends by the two sites mentioned above, Kallmet and Troshan [Fig. 14]. This route is the nearest way to Lissos, but may not have been the main road considering the high altitude on which it runs. The coastal region would have been accessed most probably by a road following the Drin River, located further north of Ungrej. The large valley to the north and the east, over which Ungrej had control and which was crossed by the Dibri stream, led to the valley of the Fani river and on to Ochrid Lake, connecting Lissos territory with Dardania and Macedonia.⁴⁷ Thus, despite its isolation from the coast because of the high mountains, Ungrej seems to have been strategically positioned on an important crossroads, and the evidence of sporadic reuse of the fortification in

⁴⁴ ADAM 1982, p. 25.

⁴⁵ SHPUZA 2020. Xibri in the hinterland of Zgërdhesh, dated to the fourth century BC, can serve equally as a good comparison, see ISLAMI 1969.

⁴⁶ The Mirdita region is made up of ultramafic rock of this kind; see ZIU 1991, p. 149.

⁴⁷ On the main roads in the region see ADAMI 1983, pp. 37–40.

late antiquity and the Middle Ages, as attested by the mortar noted in the south wall, could be related to this connectivity.

According to the descriptions given by Dilaver Kurti, a similar Hellenistic fortress existed at Ferrë Shkopet, at the confluence of the Mati and Fani rivers.⁴⁸ The site is 17 km south of Ungrej and may have played a similar role, controlling the contact zone between the Labeates and Parthini, as well as the crossroads of inland routes from Macedonia and beyond with the north–south coastal road.

3. Vrith (Maja Gjytet)

The site goes by the name of Maja Gjytet (“Top of the Citadel”) [Fig. 15]. It lies at an altitude of 890 m asl, its location giving it very good visibility of the land extending to the west and northwest. The Zadrima plain, Shkodra Lake, Bushat and Ulcinj can all be seen from the summit. Vrith is situated close to the *castrum* of Vig and the site of Korthpulë mentioned by Nopsca as being on the Roman road from Lissus to Naissus.⁴⁹

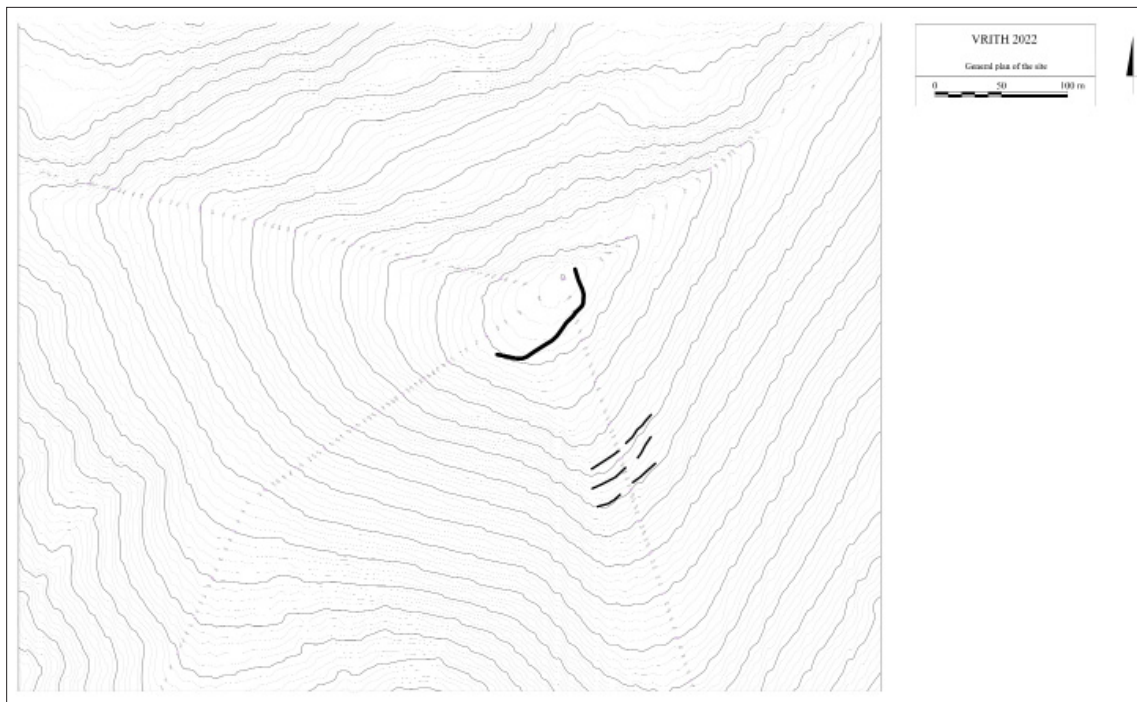


Fig. 15. Plan of the main walls at the top of the hill at Vrith (B. Sina, E. Blloshmi, B. Wojciechowski, S. Shpuza)

The locality features a series of walls that are 1.50 m thick and 0.50 m high [Fig. 16a and b]. The main wall encloses the top of the hill. It has two entrances, both 2 m wide, in the southern part [Fig. 17]. Many similar walls are to be seen on the southern and northern hillslopes, outside this first enclosure. The sections are approximately 2 m long each and follow approximately the same line even though there is no apparent continuity between them. Interestingly, they do not seem to have been higher in the past. Similar walls were seen also in the surroundings of the hill prospected by our team.

⁴⁸ KURTI 1979, pp. 77–80.

⁴⁹ NOPSCA 1909, p. 83.



Fig. 16a–b. View of the walls at Vrith (S. Shpuza)



Fig. 17. View of the gate at Vrith (S. Shpuza)

Without any pottery evidence from the surface, it is difficult to make any definitive statements about the age or role of this site. The toponym (Gjytet) argues in favor of its “antiquity”, whereas its marginal position, probably on the border of the territory of Lissos and Scodra, and its situation on a rocky ridge with little agricultural potential suggest a possible pastoral function.⁵⁰

A larger archaeological panorama

Forts like the one in Ungrej are common in the coastal area around Scodra and Lissos, but not in the eastern hinterland, arguing indirectly for their role in policing the immediate hinterland of Lissos and of the Labeates in general. However, a tentative reconstruction of the extent of the territory under Labeatian control revolves crucially around Livy’s note that the tribe were adjacent with the Penestae, whose border fortress was Oeneum.⁵¹ The Penestae are believed to have occupied the valley of the Black Drin and the whereabouts of Lake Ochrid, which was part of an important contact zone between the Labeates, Dardanians, Dassaretis and Macedonians. According to Livy, the tribe had three main settlements and 11 fortresses, none of which have been located.⁵² Most of the hypotheses and discussion bear on the identification of their main city, Uscana.

Archaeological data for Hellenistic sites in the contact zone between the Penestae and the Labeates is poor to say the least. Sofraçan (Qyteza e Sofraçanit) is a small fortified site, 0.3 ha in size, situated 862 m asl.⁵³ Pesjaka and Topojan, both small sites (0.7 and 1 ha respectively), originating from the Late Bronze/early Iron Age, seem to have been occupied in the fourth–first

⁵⁰ FORBES 1995.

⁵¹ LIVY XLIII, 19, 3. For earlier discussion on the extent of their territory see SHPUZA 2017, pp. 43–45.

⁵² For a discussion and bibliography see PROEVA, BRANKOVIC 2004, pp. 197–202.

⁵³ BUNGURI 2018a, pp. 66–67, Fig. 6.

enturies BC as suggested by the pottery, but apparently not fortified.⁵⁴ The reuse of Hellenistic *spolia* in late antique fortifications at Grazhdan, as well as the discovery of some ceramics and pithoi, suggests the presence of an unknown Illyrian site in the area.⁵⁵ Traces of small settlements in the region of Dibër have been reported at the sites of Klenjë, Borovë, Ostren, Prodan, Valikardhë, Krajë, Vlashaj⁵⁶ and in the village of Çidhën.⁵⁷ None of these sites have been explored archaeologically. The excavations at Perlat, in the Mirdita region, in the heartland of Lissos, have revealed similarities to Dibër. The agglomeration has no fortification walls and no regular architecture can be seen. The pottery and weapons coming from burial assemblages are like those from the main cities of Lissos and Scodra.⁵⁸

Fortified sites are just as rare in Dardanian territory. There is Peca (near nowadays Kukës) situated at the confluence of the Black and White Drin, an important place of contact for the Dardanians, Illyrians and Macedonians. Mainly known for its late antique fortification, this small site (0.5 ha) preserves fragments of walls and pottery from the Hellenistic and earlier periods.⁵⁹ There is also Rosuja near modern Tropoja, where the Hellenistic phase is well presented by a well-made fortification wall and numerous ceramic finds.⁶⁰ Bep Jubani mentions two other sites in the area with high archaeological potential for the Hellenistic period, one at Mamëz and the other at Vila (Bushtricë), both nowadays in the Kukës region.⁶¹ Neither has been excavated so far.⁶² Assuming a Hellenistic occupation is confirmed at these two sites, it would signify a network of forts and settlements along the left side of the Black Drin. In Kosovo, a fortification has been unearthed at the site of Gumnishtë (near Novo Brdo). The character of the walls, the finds and the large area of about 8 ha inside the circuit suggest an agglomeration of importance starting from the fourth century BC.⁶³ The proximity of functioning lead mines was also crucial.⁶⁴

The archaeological panorama of the region presented here appears to bear out Strabo's description of the Dardanians as an uncouth peoples living in dens dug in the manure.⁶⁵ This way of living, similar to how Tacitus describes the Germans, seems to reflect a harsh climate,⁶⁶ with fortified site occurring rarely and justified by special circumstances: either control over an important road (Peca and Rosuja) and/or exploitation of important natural resources (Gumnishtë). However, this picture may be biased as a result of insufficient archaeological investigation, whether field surveys in this geographically fragmented mountainous region or excavation without which identification of sites could present a difficulty in view of the fact that architecture in the region in this period, as indicated by the examples of Peca⁶⁷ and Xibri⁶⁸ in Albania and other sites in Kosovo,⁶⁹ tended to use mud brick, daub and wood as building material.

Another indication to consider is Polybius's description of the territory between Mont Scardus (Mali i Sharrit) and the hinterland of Lissos and Scodra as the desert of Illyria.⁷⁰ The Macedonian embassy to King Genthius in Polybius's account had to travel mostly through mountainous areas on the northwestern Macedonian border.⁷¹ The devastation and depopulation of this region was

⁵⁴ BUNGURI 1994; 1997: 2018b.

⁵⁵ BUNGURI 2007, pp. 102–104.

⁵⁶ For information on these sites see SADIKU 1971.

⁵⁷ BUNGURI 2011, pp. 203–204.

⁵⁸ JUBANI 1986, p. 141.

⁵⁹ PËRZHITA 1997.

⁶⁰ JUBANI, CEKA 1971. The site sits near an important road linking the Labeates and the Dardanians, but is situated in the territory of the latter.

⁶¹ For a general discussion on the archaeology of remains from the fourth–first centuries BC in the Kukës region see JUBANI 2020, p. 618–623.

⁶² For a first schematic plan of the Vila site see PËRZHITA 2008, p. 34, Fig. 4.

⁶³ MEHMETAJ 2010, pp. 85–86.

⁶⁴ ČERŠKOV 1973, p. 17.

⁶⁵ STRABO VII, 5, 7.

⁶⁶ TACITUS, *Germania*, 16 ; BALADIÉ 2021, p. 212.

⁶⁷ PËRZHITA 1997, p. 310.

⁶⁸ ISLAMI 1969, p. 316.

⁶⁹ MIRDITA 1981, p. 98.

⁷⁰ POLYBIUS XXVIII, 8.

⁷¹ For a discussion of and theories on the localization of *Illyria solitudines* see ISLAMI 1974 pp. 38–39, note 187 and JUBANI 2020, pp. 306–311 with respective bibliographies.

the result of measures implemented by Philip V of Macedonia and then Perseus, who established strongholds (such as Bylazora, Sintia and Perseis) in the contact zone with the Dardanians.

Terminological issues: *urbs*, *oppida* and *castella*

If it is the case, as this archaeological panorama seems to suggest, that the territory east of Lissos in the Hellenistic period did not differ much from that occupied by the Dardani and some of the Penestae, and that the standard form of settlement was a small unfortified village (*kome*), one begins to wonder why modern science has yet failed to identify the cities mentioned in the ancient sources. Some of them, like Uscana, said to have a population of 10,000, would have covered large areas. One possible reason for this is the misleading terminology often used by ancient authors. For example, referring to sites in Illyria, Polybius uses the term *poleis* practically to the exclusion of all others.⁷² The exceptions are *polismation* (II, 11, 16), a term usually used for small cities situated on the margins of the Greek world, which he uses for Rhizon, mainly because of the physical aspect of the city rather than its status, and the terms *asfaleia* (refuge/shelter) and *ochyroma* (fortifications), which refer to the forts and enclosures around Lissos (VIII, 14, 11).⁷³ Strabo, whose account is largely based on Polybius, also tends to favor the term *poleis*. He uses it for an unknown city of the Galabri in Dardania (VII, 5, 7), the cities of the Iapodes and Dalmatians (VII, 5,3; 5,4) as well as the 70 cities destroyed by Paulus Emilius in Epirus (VII, 7, 3).

Livy, the main source for the geography of the area during the events of the war, uses a series of denominations for the places he mentions in his text. He uses *urbs* for the cities of the Parthini (XLIII, 23), Heraclea (XLIV, 9), Bassania (XLIV, 30), Caravandis (XLIV, 30), Scodra (XLIV, 31), Meteon (XLIV, 32) and Sintia (XXVI, 25). But he also employs *oppidum* for Uscana (XLIII, 10), Oeneum (XLIII, 19), Cassandrea (XLIV, 11) and Durnium (XLIV, 30), and *castellum* for Draudacum and other sites around Uscana (XLIV, 19, 20). More importantly, when speaking of the declaration of Anicius in Scodra, he refers to the retirement of the Roman army from the oppida (*oppidis*), citadels (*arcibus*) and fortresses (*castella*). *Civitas* is never used for any of these sites, although it is mentioned on several occasions with regard to Greek and Macedonian cities (XLIII, 6; 19). According to Roman terminology, *civitas* can mean both a city with its territory and an autonomous city with its own institutions.⁷⁴ Yet the appellation *urbs*, usually given to the main cities, such as Scodra or Heraclea, is applied by him to Meteon, which is barely half a hectare in size and shows no signs of monumentality.⁷⁵ Within this Livian logic, either Caravantis or Durnium could be identified with the fortification of Ungrej, assuming that this region was part of the territory of the Cavii (for further discussion of this idea see below).⁷⁶ *Oppidum* seems to be used in reference to a large spectrum of sites, including important ones like Uscana. For the Romans, the appellation may not have implied any special diversity between cities and hence was applicable to most. For example, Caesar makes no difference between *civitas* and *oppidum* in reference to the same city.⁷⁷ All this said, *arcibus* and *castella* seem to denote for Livy small fortresses and upper places with a predominantly military role. Caesar uses these terms in the same way,⁷⁸ but on some occasion's *castella* is a fortified village as well as a fortified military outpost.⁷⁹ Frontinus, describing the military operations of Pyrrhus in Illyria, calls the main cities

⁷² POLYBIUS VIII, 13, 3 (*poleis* for Lissos); III, 16, 3; 18, 1; 18, 6.

⁷³ For the military terminology applied by Polybius see PEDECH 1964, pp. 548–551.

⁷⁴ LEVEAU 1993, p. 463.

⁷⁵ SHPUZA 2017, pp. 47–48.

⁷⁶ See the discussion in our text.

⁷⁷ CAESAR III, 5; 11; 12; 29; 41; 42.

⁷⁸ CAESAR III, 13. He uses the term *arcem* also for the fortifications of the acropolis of Apollonia in Illyria.

⁷⁹ CAESAR III, 42.

civitates and the secondary ones *urbs*.⁸⁰ However, judging by their number, the fortresses situated around the main cities seem to correspond better to the appellation of *castellum*.⁸¹

Comparing ancient terminology with archaeological data leaves one with the strong impression that the ancient authors we are dealing with were in fact unfamiliar with the geography and realities of the region they were writing about. Moreover, Livy's terminology in reference to various sites — and his text is based extensively on a reading of passages from Polybius — seems to be diversified beyond what the situation on the ground would suggest.

Pirustae and Cavii

One of the tribes associated with the Lissos hinterland are the Pirustae, mentioned by Caesar as looting the borders of the province of Illyricum in 54 BC.⁸² Caesar does not name any of the victims of these raids, but Lissos has been suggested, mainly based on Caesar's reconstruction of the city's fortification, which is documented more or less at this time by Latin inscriptions.⁸³ It may have been a direct cause, but recent excavations at the site have yielded evidence for an urban program on a bigger scale, initiated by Caesar and continued during the reign of Augustus, rather than a limited addressing of calls for immediate protection.⁸⁴

Controversies regarding the origin of the Pirustae and the location of their territory existed already in antiquity.⁸⁵ Strabo considered them as Pannonians, together with the Breuci, Daesidiates and Maezi,⁸⁶ but that would remove their core territory from the hinterland of Lissos. To Paterculus the Pirustae were, like the Daesidiatae, a Dalmatian tribe.⁸⁷ Ptolemy placed them in Dalmatia, more precisely next to the territory of the Docleates,⁸⁸ thus bringing them closer to the territory of Scodra and Lissos.⁸⁹ All this considered, the most plausible idea is to look for their traditional territory somewhere north or northeast of Scodra. Even if the suggestion that Lissos was among the raided cities is true, the raid could have been an isolated event.

The Cavii are another tribe appearing in the texts in relation with Lissos, but only in Pliny⁹⁰ and Livy: "However, when he (Genthios) had been stirred up to fight the Romans, as has been related above, he collected all his forces at Lissus. These were fifteen thousand men. From there he sent his brother with a thousand infantry and fifty cavalry to subdue the tribe of the Cavii either by force or threats, while he himself advanced from Lissus five miles to the city of Bassania... As Caravantius arrived among the Cavii, the town of Durnium received him hospitably; Caravandis, another city, shut him out; and while he was ravaging their territory far and wide, a few scattered soldiers were killed by the rallying farmers".⁹¹ However, information on the Cavii is modest to say the least, resulting in different theories. On the one hand, Wilhelm Tomascheck places the tribe between the Labeates and the Parthini,⁹² seemingly corresponding to the area

⁸⁰ FRONTINUS III, 6, 3.

⁸¹ CABANES 1989, p. 60.

⁸² CAESAR V, 1, 5. The tribe's renown as experienced miners (FLORUS II, 25) could have fueled this association, linked as it is artificially with the inner lands of Lissos rich in minerals.

⁸³ PRENDI ZHEKU 1972, p. 242 (cf. *CIL* III, 1704 ; *CILA* no. 23, 24).

⁸⁴ See OETTEL 2014, pp. 30–32. This urban renewal seems to have been of *short durée* since both buildings and pottery of Roman imperial age are completely missing from the *intra muros* area. This suggests that Lissus had lost its urban character during the imperial period.

⁸⁵ See ŠAŠEL KOS 2005, pp. 343–345.

⁸⁶ STRABO 7, 5, 3.

⁸⁷ PATERCULUS II, 115, 4.

⁸⁸ PTOLEMY II, 16, 5.

⁸⁹ Livy lists them among the main group of peoples freed from taxation after the fall of Genthios. LIVY 45, 26, 13.

⁹⁰ PLINY III, 143.

⁹¹ LIVY XLIV 30, 6. Bassania, Durnium and Caravandis are mentioned only by Livy; these might be corrupted appellations. See BRISCOE 2012, p. 563.

⁹² TOMASCHEK 1867, p. 701.

south of Lissos. On the other hand, Piero Meloni would like to see the Cavii north of Scodra,⁹³ arguing that during the siege of Scodra Genthios turned to the north for help, where his brother Caravandis was already searching for allies. According to Wilhelm Kroll, the Cavii lived near the border with the Macedonians,⁹⁴ meaning somewhere near the Penestae or the Dassaretes. Nicolas Hammond suggested that they should be located in the valley of the Mat river.⁹⁵ Carl Patsch,⁹⁶ followed by Domenico Mustilli,⁹⁷ and Paul Jal,⁹⁸ think that the Cavii could be the same as the Candavi, with only Livy generally mistaking their name.

Linguistics and toponymy were also engaged in an effort to identify the territory of this tribe. Ndre Mjeda's theory, reported by Giuseppe Valentini, stemmed from the idea that the name of the city of the Cavii, Caravandis, and its inhabitants, the Caravandini, was transformed into the modern Kurbini (the suffix *-ini* being common for ancient populations in the region, for example, the Scodrinii).⁹⁹ The transfer would have followed this model: Karav-Kërëv-Kurb. The region of Kurbini corresponds to the area around modern Laç, along the Mat river valley. This theory corresponds to Hammond's suggestions.

One of the cities of the Cavii, Durnium, appears to be associated also with the name of Epicaria,¹⁰⁰ mentioned by Ptolemy as a Roman city.¹⁰¹ For many, this unknown city corresponds to modern Puka.¹⁰² If so, the theory relocates the territory of the Cavii to the northeast of Lissos.

Without claiming to have solved the problem, I would see the Cavii not far from Lissos. It is difficult to imagine Caravantis hazarding an expedition into the territory of the Candavi, neighbors of the Parthini (Roman allies), residing near the Shkumbini valley (location of a Roman military camp) with only 1000 soldiers, unless he had to negotiate difficult mountain passes and small valleys that would have been problematic for heavy infantry and a large number of horsemen. The fact that Genthios took most of his army (around 15,000 men) to lay siege to Bassania, situated just 5 miles from Lissos, suggests that his authority was not as stable as we might think, even in the immediate territory of Lissos. Probably there was a rift between the king and some of the communities living in his kingdom regarding the war with the Romans. We know that first the Dalmatians¹⁰³ and then the Daorsi¹⁰⁴ refused him their support. Other populations and cities that were granted immunity by the Romans in return for taking the Roman side in the war include Issa, Rison and Ulcinj. The missing parts of Livy's book presumably reported on the fate of Lissos during the war. Equally so, the location of Cavii heartland south of Lissos appears to be improbable. This was Parthini land, shared with some smaller communities, such as the Abroi and Helidonae.¹⁰⁵ Piero Meloni,¹⁰⁶ followed also by Selim Islami,¹⁰⁷ located the Cavii north of Shkodra Lake because that was where, according to Livy, Genthios in his last days expected to find assistance.¹⁰⁸ However, a few lines later Livy says that this northern tribe that Caravantis was trying to involve in the war against the Romans were the Daorsi.¹⁰⁹

All things considered, the present author is of the opinion that the most plausible localization for the Cavii is the mountainous region east or southeast of Lissos. This region, ensconced

⁹³ MELONI 1953, p. 355, note 2.

⁹⁴ KROLL 1921, XI, 57 (*Kauoi*).

⁹⁵ HAMMOND 1988, p. 538.

⁹⁶ PATSCH 1929, pp. 102–108.

⁹⁷ MUSTILLI 1940, p. 283.

⁹⁸ JAL 2003, p. 182, n. 9.

⁹⁹ VALENTINI 2014, p. 102. Mjeda adopts the same linguistic interpretation to identify the unknown Illyrian city of Bassania with modern Pedhanë. For this see SHPUZA, DYCZEK 2019 and SHPUZA, NALLBANI 2022 with references.

¹⁰⁰ HAZLITT 1851, p. 147, without stating explicit reasons for such an association.

¹⁰¹ PTOLEMY 16, 7.

¹⁰² The idea seems to have originated in the early 20th century; see NOPSCA 1912, p. 185, and his bibliography.

¹⁰³ POLYBIUS XXXII, 9.

¹⁰⁴ LIVY XLV, 26, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Steph. Byz., s.v.

¹⁰⁶ MELONI 1953, p. 355.

¹⁰⁷ ISLAMI 1974, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ LIVY XLIV, 31, 11.

¹⁰⁹ LIVY XLV, 26, 15.

between the Drin in the north and the Fan in the south, constitutes a real *terra incognita* in terms of archaeological sites from this period as well as the localization of ancient communities. The Cavii should be counted among the tribes of a large Labeatian “confederation” that extended, according to ancient sources, from the Adriatic Sea in the west to near the Black Drin in the east.

This discussion of the Cavii is part of a broader issue, namely, the localization of many small Illyrian tribes appearing sporadically in the ancient sources.¹¹⁰ Specifically, this part of Illyria is marked by geographical diversity and subdivision into distinct territories dominated mostly by small valleys scattered between the mountains and the coastal strip. It features a palimpsest of tribal communities living here until the Roman conquest. The overview presented here gives an image of the Labeates as a federal state, composed of many small ethnic groups, occupying a vast territory and characterized by a low density of urban settlements, especially in the heartlands.

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¹¹⁰ See, for example, the list of tribes appearing in PLINY III, 26: Ozuaei, Partheni, Hemasini, Arthitae, Armistae, and in APPIAN, *Illyrike*, 4, 16: Oxyaei, Pertho-neatae, Bathiatae, Taulantii, Cambaei, Cinambri, Mero-meni, Pyrissaei.

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