

# GENIUS LOCI

# LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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Budapest 2018

The publication of this volume was generously funded by



CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

ISBN 978-615-5766-19-0

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2018

ARCHAEOLOGUA ALAPÍTVÁNY

H-1067 Budapest, Teréz krt. 13

[www.archaeolingua.hu](http://www.archaeolingua.hu)

Copy editing and language editing: the editors

Layout: Zsanett Kállai

Map: Viktor Lagutov, Zsuzsa Eszter Pető, Mária Vargha, István Gergő Farkas

Front cover design: Eszter Bence-Molnár

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# Mountains in the Lifeways and History of Northern Macedonia

JUDITH A. RASSON\*

The mountainous area of western Northern Macedonia (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) provides examples of the many ways people interact with mountains. Mountains are demanding terrain, often with poor soils and cold winters, but incorporated nonetheless into the lifestyles of people who live near them. Here I discuss the results of historical and ethnoarchaeological research in the area between the city of Bitola and Ohrid and Prespa lakes, focusing on the Pelister and Galičica national parks (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Historically, mainly sheep grazed on grass at high altitudes in this region. Local cultural knowledge also allowed people to harvest wild plants for seasoning food and folk medicine; pine pitch (*smol*) was used in the recent past for medical and other applications. Mountain pastures augmented village resources significantly.<sup>2</sup> With roots reaching back into prehistory, village populations moved from lower to higher elevations during the summer to tend grazing flocks or even lived on the move continually (pastoral nomadism). The lifestyle of pastoral nomads, ethnic groups like the Vlachs (who speak a language similar to Romanian) and others, has had a romantic appeal to researchers even though it has been severely curtailed,<sup>3</sup> especially since the end of World War II, by the development of infrastructure like national boundaries, national parks, and agribusiness. Previously, herding sheep in these mountains was a significant part of the regional economy. Shepherds built roughly piled dry-stone walls (Fig. 2) to create spaces where sheep rested and were milked, where cheese was made, and where shepherds could sleep and store personal effects. Pastoral nomadism and transhumance were economically crucial during the Ottoman



► Fig. 1. Landscape in Pelister National Park looking east. Note the growth of shrubs in the foreground as part of the process of vegetation succession (photo: J. Rasson, 2007).

period from 1400 to 1912 (and probably earlier) when they provided products—cheese, meat, wool, and hides—that were used locally and exported to urban centers.

In the area that is now Galičica National Park,<sup>4</sup> villagers near the park developed uses for the mountainous terrain that extended resources beyond their village properties. Traditionally used



► Fig. 2. Piled-stone walls (originally topped with dry brush) that are part of a sheepfold (*bačilo*) high in the mountains near Golemo Jezero [Big Lake], with Pelister Park ranger Iljo Sterjovski (photo: J. Rasson, 2007).

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for grazing sheep and making cheese, with permission from the park they now maintain hay fields (transporting the hay down to the village for animal fodder in the winter), pasture sheep, and grow crops (principally potatoes) on plots formerly used as sheep pens. In Pelister National Park, succession of vegetation is underway, probably owing to the cessation of pasture use (see Fig. 1). The park leases a flock of sheep in the summer to graze in the high pastures to maintain the grass cover to some extent. Pelister is managed for forest products; there is little or no agricultural activity as in Galičica National Park.

Pelister National Park is a haven for tourism; local residents from the area escape the summer heat by hiking in the park, often gathering wild herbs for domestic use. People can harvest wild blueberries for a short season (by permit, but without a fee), which allows local residents to supplement their incomes by selling the fruit to a local factory for fruit juice. The park also sells firewood locally in addition to its larger-scale forestry activities.

Mountains, here as elsewhere, are not just wild territory; they are communal and managed (even now the park areas are managed by the state).<sup>5</sup> Reserved communal areas (called *sinors*), used mostly for grazing, belonged to villages at lower elevations. Designating village areas undoubtedly reduced the potential for conflicts over resource use. Pelister became a national park in 1947 and Galičica in 1956, taking *sinor* management out of village control, but local residents still remember the locations. The importance of village lands is seen in the explanation for the place named Dva Groba (Two Graves) on a ridge at 2,007 m (6,585 feet) in Pelister National Park.<sup>6</sup> The explanation for the name in local folklore is that during the time when this region was part of the Ottoman



► **Fig. 3.** Remains of a sheepfold of piled stones (low walls in the lower center of the photo) in Galičica National Park (photo: J. Rasson, 2007).



► **Fig. 4.** Overlapping use of mountain landscapes in Pelister National Park. On a ridge overlooking a settlement on the shore of Lake Prespa a sheepfold (lines of white rocks in the foreground and to the left) is overlapped by a line of small depressions—World War I features, probably foxholes (photo: J. Rasson, 2010).

Empire, two Turks were killed and buried there and the Ottoman authorities demanded compensation; because the people from the village of Magarevo were rich, they paid the fine and took that space for their pastures.<sup>7</sup>

Besides grass, because sheep need water to drink every day, herding facilities were usually located near natural water sources. In the dry karst landscape of Galičica National Park there are few natural water sources although there is considerable pasture (Fig. 3). A water supply could open up part of the landscape where all the requisite resources are not otherwise available. A folktale collected in both Macedonia and Hercegovina recounts that a ceramic pipe led down from the high pastures to convey milk to the village.<sup>8</sup> An elderly male resident of Trnovo (in 2007) related an account of ceramic pipes that brought milk down the mountain from the Pelister area, and a 52-year-old shepherd from Magarevo, near Pelister National Park stated (in 2010) that he had seen such pipes at Čumci (a place name meaning flue pipe) in the park. This has not yet been verified in the field, but in 2009, clay pipes were discovered in Galičica National Park near the place called Djafa, where sheep have been tended for many years (Fig. 3). The pipes seem to have been part of a small water delivery system that conveyed water from a natural spring on a hill to sheepfolds at a lower elevation. The pipe apparently extended 600 to 700 meters. A shepherd who had heard about the pipes and wanted to make





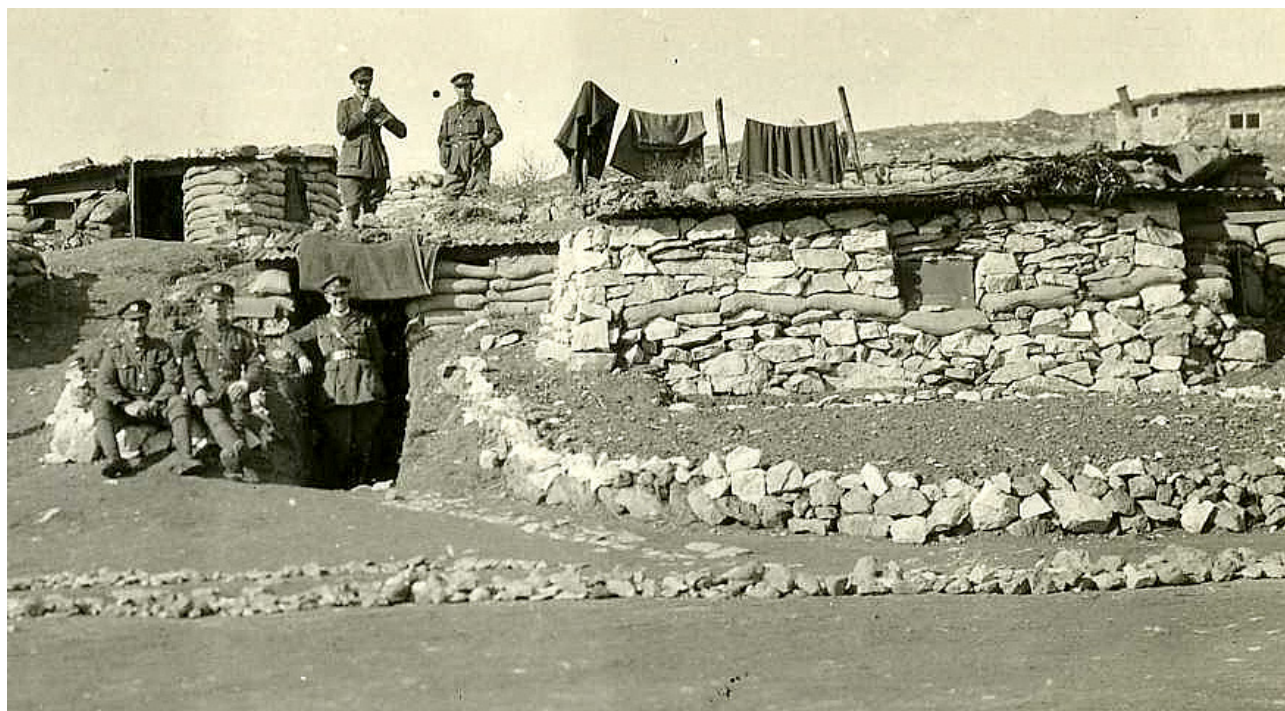
► Fig. 5. Remains of military stonework in Pelister National Park, 2007 (photo: J. Rasson).

a small pond discovered them in 2008.<sup>9</sup> They show that considerable effort was invested in facilities for tending sheep. They may date to the early twentieth century, when products from sheep were significant in regional commerce.

Mountains can play a role in managing cultural aggression. In the nineteenth century, the mountainous terrain provided protection from bandits for a large Vlach village called Maloviste, now in Pelister National Park. The residents maintained large flocks of sheep that grazed in the high meadows along with sizeable numbers of horses

and donkeys used as pack animals (wheeled vehicles are not suitable for most of the terrain). With limited area for crops but close to mountain hayfields, the village residents were middlemen in trade south into Greece along a trail (called the French Road [*Francuski Pat*] during World War I) which followed the crest of the mountains, connecting Bitola, an important trade center, with commercial centers in Greece.

World War I had a dramatic impact on the area that now lies in Pelister National Park; it lay on the front lines of the so-called Salonica (*Solun*) Front (also known as the Macedonian Front), where the Central Powers: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, and Turkey fought the Allies: Serbia, France, England, and Romania. As elsewhere in World War I, this front was maintained, with occasional attempts to breach it, for a number of years, until the Allies withdrew to the west.<sup>10</sup> During the long stalemate, both sides dug in—creating a network of trenches and fortified positions linked by roads. After the war, all the military features were abandoned. Although the perishable elements have disappeared, many different landscape modifications still exist (Fig. 4). Military structures were often built with dry-stone walls, many of which are still visible (Figs.



► Fig. 6. World War I photograph (here cropped) showing military stonework (with interspersed sandbags) entitled “British Troops Salonica Front” by photographer Merl Lavoy. The original is in the Reeves Collection 92-40 in the Otis Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine, Silver Spring, MD. Reproduced with thanks.

5 and 6). From observation of these remains it appears that they can be distinguished from shepherding remains because the shepherds' structures tend to be more stacked rocks than true masonry (compare to Fig. 2).

The war was detrimental to life in the mountains; many people were deported to places like Bulgaria or fled to places like Bitola (then called Monastir). Village life in Maloviste was disrupted; it was largely depopulated and never regained its former importance, although it is still inhabited today. Normal life in the mountains returned to some extent between the world wars. In World War II the fighting in Macedonia did not affect the western mountains as much as previously. After World War II, however, great changes took place. Macedonia was incorporated into socialist Yugoslavia, which espoused the goal of developing an industrial state with all the attendant changes to cultural and social life.

The establishment of national parks in the then-Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Macedonia was symptomatic of widespread social and political changes that included industrial development, urban growth, increased educational standards, and electrification projects, which undoubtedly affected the economy of this area. The importance of the mountains in the rural economy and the impact of establishing the park are reflected in population numbers. Census data reveal a picture of the area in and around Pelister National Park; when the park was created, traditional access to resources like high-altitude grazing land was terminated. In 1948, there were 3,936 residents in six villages adjacent to the park; 504 lived in Maloviste, the only settlement within the park boundaries. By 1994, only 1,499 remained (121 in Maloviste);<sup>11</sup> there was great hardship and out-migration from the region, especially men, who often went to Australia.

Mountains play many roles through time in local and national lifeways. Despite the solidity and seeming passivity of mountains, cultural groups use them to meet their social and economic needs as well as merely adapting to their existence.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This research was conducted between 2007 and 2010, supported by a grant from Central European University. I am very grateful for the help that I received from staff members at Pelister National Park (especially Iljo Sterjovski), Galičica National Park, the National Museum in Bitola (Risto Paligora and particularly Gordana Filipovska Lazarovska), and Ljubčo Risteski of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje. I also sincerely thank CEU alumni Oliver Avramovski, Katarina Hristovska, Kristina Biceva, and Jelena Jarić for all their advice and hard work.
- <sup>2</sup> There is an extensive literature about pastoralism, for instance, Raquel Gil Montero, Jon Mathieu, and Chetan Singh, "Mountain Pastoralism 1500-2000: An Introduction," *Nomadic Peoples* 13, no. 2 (2009): 1-16; Lucia Nixon and Simon Price, "The Diachronic Analysis of Pastoralism through Comparative Variables," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 96 (2001): 395-424; and others.
- <sup>3</sup> A. J. B. Wace and M. S. Thompson, *Nomads of the Balkans; An Account of Life and Customs among the Vlachs of the Northern Pindus* (London: Methuen, 1914) and Tom Winnifrieth, "Scholars, Travels, Archives: Greek History and Culture through the British School at Athens," *British School at Athens Studies* 17 (2009): 67-75.
- <sup>4</sup> See the website "Exploring Macedonia," accessed Sept 20, 2018, <http://www.exploringmacedonia.com/Galičica.nspix>
- <sup>5</sup> Communal land use in mountains has been explored by (among others) Robert McC. Netting, "What Alpine Peasants Have in Common: Observations on Communal Tenure in a Swiss Village," *Human Ecology* 4, no. 2 (1976): 135-146; and "Of Men and Meadows: Strategies of Alpine Land Use," *Anthropological Quarterly* 45, No. 3 (1972): 132-144.
- <sup>6</sup> See the website "Mapcarta," accessed August 31, 2018, <https://mapcarta.com/29171690>
- <sup>7</sup> Collected during an interview in 2007 from an elderly man resident in Trnovo.
- <sup>8</sup> Vlatko Palavestra, *Historijska usmena predanja iz Bosne i Hercegovine: Studija—Zbornik i komentari* [Historical oral sources from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Studies and comments] (Sarajevo: buybook[sic], 2004), 148.
- <sup>9</sup> Park personnel recovered two tubular pipe fragments with a collar on one end that can be inserted in the wide end of the next segment. The pipe fragments are wheel-thrown, unglazed clay, red in color, varying from 8 to 10 mm in thickness over the length of each pipe segment.
- <sup>10</sup> There is little literature on this front in English; see the map showing the World War I front lines and military actions by both sides in and around the area that is now Pelister National Park (west of Bitola), Vanče Stojčev, *Military History of Macedonia* (Skopje: Military Academy "General Mihailo Apostolski," 2004), particularly the map on page 85.
- <sup>11</sup> *Plan ha upravuvanje na Nacionalniot Park Pelister* [Plan for the management of Pelister National Park] (Skopje, 2003), 103, Table 49. On file at the park headquarters in Bitola.