

THE ALBANIAN *LAPIDAR SURVEY*

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Abstract

During the communist dictatorship, the Albanian regime erected a large number of so-called *lapidars* in virtually every village, town, and city of the country. These concrete monoliths functioned as monuments commemorating a variety of “martyrs of the nation” fallen during the National Liberation War (1944–5) but also monumentalized the presence of the Party of Labour of Albania throughout the land. Their function as markers of commemoration as well as social progress is clearly shown in the Viktor Gjika’s 1984 “cine-poem” *Lapidari*. The ubiquity of these unique monumental structures and their relative opacity in the current cityscape – neither demolished nor maintained, but largely fallen into disrepair – makes them emblematic of the undigested nature of Albania’s communist past.

In 2014, research bureau for the arts and humanities The Department of Eagles (Departamenti i Shqiponjave) initiated the

research project Albanian Lapidar Survey, involving research into the construction and topography of all lapidars in Albania and their historical context, as well as the documentation and geotagging of all remaining lapidars in Albania that could still be located by means of archival sources or interviews. Contrary to various artistic projects implemented in other post-communist countries such as ex-Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, which focused on a certain aesthetic appreciation, if not glorification of past monumentalities, the intention of the Albanian Lapidar Survey was both generic and encyclopaedic in nature, with the intent of making these cultural artefacts accessible to future research through an online database and an open access catalogue.

The final results of the Albanian Lapidar Survey were published in 2015 in a three-volume publication *Lapidari* by punctum books.

Key words: lapidar, communism, post-communism, monumentality, propaganda, digital documentation, open access publishing, Department of Eagles, punctum books

During the communist dictatorship, the Albanian regime erected a large number of so-called *lapidars* in virtually every village, town, and city of the country. These concrete monoliths mostly functioned as monuments commemorating a variety of “martyrs of the nation” fallen during the National Liberation War (1944–45), and were part of creating a new genre of political saints to replace the religious saints abolished by the atheist regime. This included state-sanctioned hagiographies,¹ extensive

¹ *Yje të pashuar*, 5 vols., Tirana: Drejtoria politike e ushtrisë popullore të R.P.Sh., 1971–n.d.

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“martyrs’ cemeteries” centered in every county as ritual site,² and the renaming of various streets and public institutions all around the country. The cult of these military saints and the erection of lapidars functioned at the same time to engrain and monumentalize the presence of the Party of Labour of Albania in both society and the landscape. Lapidars were subsequently adopted to commemorate the victories of communism itself, with monuments commemorating the events such as the redistribution of agrarian land and the creation of roads. The ubiquity of these unique monumental structures and their relative opacity in the current cityscape – neither demolished nor maintained, but largely fallen into disrepair – makes them emblematic of the undigested nature of Albania’s communist past.

I conceived of the idea for the Albanian Lapidar Survey precisely because, despite their ubiquity in the Albanian cultural landscape, there existed no catalog or database of these monuments. They appeared to be subjected to a process of *damnatio memoriae*, the “condemnation of memory”, very much like those former communist leaders cut out from Albanian publications after they had fallen from grace.³ At the same time, elsewhere in the Balkans and the former Eastern Block, both artistic and scholarly interest in these monuments and architecture from the communist period was on the rise, with multiple, widely publicized click-bait photo projects being published.⁴ In Albania,

² See Gëzim Qëndro, “The Thanatology of Hope”, in *Lapidari*, ed. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Earth: punctum books, 2015, 1:61–66.

³ See Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, “The Production of Hrönir: Albanian Socialist Realism and After”, in *Workers Leaving the Studio. Looking Away from Socialist Realism*, Earth: punctum books, 2015, pp. 191–207.

⁴ See, for example, Nikola Mihov, “Forget Your Past”, 2009–12, <https://www.nikolamihov.com/forget-your-past>; Roman Bezjak, *Socialist*

another part of the architectural heritage of communism, the so-called “concrete mushrooms”, had also increasingly drawn the attention of artists and photographers.⁵ None of these projects, however, were systematic or encyclopedic in nature. They highlighted the most photogenic of the communist monuments and buildings, leaving many, perhaps more “ordinary” monuments undocumented and unknown. This romantic approach was paralleled in the photography used to document these monuments, invariably using dramatic angles and color palettes to emphasize the foreignness of their architecture. I was interested in the exact opposite: ubiquity and iteration, their boredom and normalcy. I was more drawn to the conceptual photographic approach of Bernd and Hilla Becher than a rehearsal of glossy propaganda photography.

As a result, in 2014, the research bureau for the arts and humanities Departamenti i Shqiponjave (The Department of Eagles) initiated the research project “The Albanian *lapidar* survey”, involving research into the construction and topography

Modernism, Hatje Cantz, 2011; Frédéric Chaubin, *Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed*, Taschen, 2011; Robert Burghardt and Gal Kirn, “Yugoslavian Partisan Memorials: Hybrid Memorial Architecture and Objects of Revolutionary Aesthetics”, *Manifesta Journal*, nr. 16, 2012, pp. 84–91; Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik*, Roma, 2015; and, more recently, Donald Niebyl, *Spomenik Monument Database*, FUEL, 2018, with the website <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/>. See also the online documentation project *Totally Lost*, <https://www.totallylost.eu/>.

⁵ Alicja Dobruska, “Concrete Mushrooms”, 2011, <https://www.alicjadobrucka.com/Concrete-Mushrooms>; Elian Stefa, Gyler Mydty, and Niku Alex Muçaj, *Concrete Mushrooms: Reusing Albania's 750,000 Abandoned Bunkers*, Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2012; David Galjaard, *ConcreSCO*, self-published, 2012, and its review by Ardian Vehbiu, “Bunker Shet”, *Peizazhe të Fjalës*, 12 March 2013, <https://peizazhe.com/2013/03/12/bunkeri-shet/>.

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of all lapidars in Albania and their historical context, as well as the documentation and geotagging of all remaining lapidars in Albania.⁶ The methodology of the project was divided into three phases: research, field work, and publication. The research phase was meant to gather any information that was currently available on Albanian lapidars and their location. This included the systematic survey of large online (geotagged) image collections and social media, including Flickr, Panoramio, Facebook, and Wikimapia, and a review of literature and films published during the dictatorship touching upon the martyrs of the nation. Furthermore, I did a number of interviews with sculptors, architects, legal experts, and (former) politicians active during the dictatorship to understand the bureaucratic and artistic processes involved in planning, designing, and creating the lapidars. Finally, I spent time in the State Archives, the Archive of the Albanian Television, and the archive of the Institute of Monuments to gather the remaining official documents and documentation concerning the planning, construction, and inauguration of lapidars. All location and photographic data were organized in a database and a Google Map was created indicating all known or approximate locations of lapidars, and image material was publicly collected on Tumblr.⁷

For architectural elements that are a ubiquitous part of the Albanian landscape, there was remarkably little archival material left. This probably can be attributed to two causes. The first was that it appears that nearly all lapidars were planned and executed

⁶ Department of Eagles, "Albanian Lapidar Survey," <http://departmentofeagles.org/als/>.

⁷ "Albanian Lapidar Survey", Tumblr, <https://albanianlapidarsurvey.tumblr.com/>.

on county level, which means that regional governments were responsible for lapidars, not the central government, which only got involved in the larger monumental projects. As a result, any archival materials that may have existed would have been stored in regional archives, which, due to the many territorial reorganizations of the country post-dictatorship and the general dreadful state of regional archives, were nearly impossible to recuperate. The only evidence we found of regional oversight and maintenance of lapidars was a booklet from the 1980s that we located in the Historical Museum of Çorovodë, which listed all the major monuments in the county of Skrapar. Second, following the fall of the dictatorship, lapidars were never legally recognized as cultural heritage, which explains the lack of expertise on the subject at the Institute of Monuments and the absence of any records in the State Archives.

The second phase was the field work aimed at documenting all extant lapidars in Albania. The research phase had provided about 500 known or suspected locations of lapidars, which were used to map out 60 days of field work, assuming about 10 lapidars per day could be documented. Each lapidar was documented by means of a form including basic information about the lapidar, a unique identification number, and a geotag. All lapidars were photographed in an identical and systematic manner using a Nikon Df camera with tilt/shift lens, whereas the trip itself was documented by means of an automated Narrative Clip camera mounted in the car, a Flip Video camera, and a secondary photographic camera. Progress of the field work was documented online through the Tumblr page and via video clips uploaded to

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Vimeo.⁸ The field work was eventually completed in 50 days, recording 657 monuments with more than 7,500 km traveled.

The third phase involved the processing and systemization of all data and documentation gathered during fieldwork, which were published as a three-volume publication by open-access press punctum books.⁹

In contrast with some of the monuments from ex-Yugoslavia, which in their modernist extravagance appear to capture the very movement of time, Albanian lapidars are monuments *in time*. Whereas their objects of commemoration remain stable, their form was meant to be an expression of the progress of the communist state. This meant that lapidars were regularly broken down and rebuilt with the latest materials and techniques, commemoration becoming an imitation and reflection of communist progress. This fundamental concept of Albanian communist monumentality is nowhere expressed more clearly than in the “cine-poem” *Lapidari* (1986), directed by Esat Ibro based on a scenario by Viktor Gjika.¹⁰

Lapidari follows the “life” of a lapidar, starting with its birth as the simple grave of a partizan fallen during the National Liberation War. The technologies involved are of the most basic kind: a grave mound covered with large stones, and a large boulder as headstone, into which a fellow partisan carves a rudimentary 5-pointed star with his knife. Peace arrives, and we see a shepherd chiseling a plaque featuring Skanderbeg's double-

⁸ “Department of Eagles”, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/departmentofeagles>.

⁹ Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, ed., *Lapidari*, 3 vols., Earth: punctum books, 2015.

¹⁰ See also Roland Bejko, “About the Film *Lapidari*”, in *Lapidari*, ed. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Earth: punctum books, 2015, 1:125–28.

headed eagle. As the partisan's widow and mother tend to the grave, we hear the sound of a crying baby. The dead partisan's son is born. The lapidar watches on from the background as the queer family of mother, wife, and son receive ownership of the land. The countershot shows the transfer of ownership from the perspective of the grave. We see the cultivation of the land surrounding the lapidar, and the village collectively sourcing stones for the first update of the monument, the erection of a proper stone-cut lapidar with a double-headed eagle red star. A train whistles in the background, signaling another technological upgrade. On a snowy winter night, the lapidar watches on as enemy parachutists are captured by the local volunteer brigades. Cars and trucks introduce the next technological upgrade, and the lapidar is illuminated by the flickering light of metal welding. A loudspeaker announces the split from the Soviet Union. The son has grown up and, under the watchful eye of the lapidar, engages in military training and operates agricultural machines. The introduction of industrialized mining and processing of natural stones allows for another update of the monument, a large marble-clad lapidar. The son marries. Dozens of children dressed in white, among whom no doubt the partisan's grandchildren, led by his now elderly mother, celebrate around the lapidar, as the camera zooms out. Victorious music. The end.

What is clear from Gjika and Ibro's *Lapidari* is that the Albanian lapidar does not merely commemorate the heroes of the National Liberation War, they are a representation of the partisan as both origin of the political legitimacy of the Party of Labor of Albania and a continuous reflection of its successes. The lapidar "watches" as the party fulfills its duties toward the people, by collectivizing the land, industrializing agriculture, and so on. The

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fact that lapidars fulfilled this representative function for the regime also meant that there was a tendency to erect them higher and higher, as the monument didn't merely symbolize the sacrifice of the partizans, but also the prestige of the Party. This became explicit in an article written by Kujtim Buza and Kleanth Dedi in *Zëri i Popullit* in 1971, where they complain:

“The mindless erection of lapidars, as high as possible, cut from the earth high into the sky, to be an absolute columnar lapidar rising upward – this has gone too far and has become a negative criterion in those executions.”¹¹

It is telling for the way in which the past of the dictatorship remains undigested that this particular conception of monumentality continues to dominate the present-day Albanian cultural landscape. The first architectural masterplan developed under then Tirana mayor Edi Rama – son of Albania's most important socialist-realist sculptor – included the erection of 10 skyscrapers around the center of the city,¹² and the implementation of this plan, without any apparent grounding in urban necessity, has dominated his vision of the city ever since he became prime minister. A second example of Rama's inherited fixation on a vertical form of monumentality was his response to the destruction

¹¹ Kujtim Buza and Kleanth Dedi, “Dignified Symbols for Historical Events”, in *Lapidari*, ed. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Earth: punctum books, 2015, 1:45–47.

¹² “51N4E Reveals 'French Plan' for Skënderbeg Square – Exit Explains”, *Exit*, June 12, 2017, <https://exit.al/en/2017/06/12/51n4e-reveals-french-plan-for-skenderbeg-square/>.

of Carsten Höller's sculpture *Triple Mushroom* next to the Prime Ministry.¹³ He rebuilt it, even larger.¹⁴

The “mindless erection” of skyscrapers and monuments as reflection and symbol of Rama's regime thus continues the tradition of lapidars first elaborated under the dictatorship, and shows the remarkable continuity of pre- and post-1990 cultural politics in Albania. Therefore, the continued study of these monuments is crucial to understand Albania's current predicament, because in the end the TID Tower is nothing but another technological upgrade of the monument from *Lapidari*, “cut from the earth high into the sky”.

¹³ Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "Comment: The Mushroom at the End of the Regime," *Exit*, February 17, 2019, <https://exit.al/en/2020/07/27/the-mushroom-at-the-end-of-the-regime-2/>.

¹⁴ Alice Taylor, "Replacement Mushroom Outside Edi Rama's Office in Tirana," *Exit*, July 25, 2020, <https://exit.al/en/2020/07/25/replacement-mushroom-erected-outside-edi-ramas-office-in-tirana/>.

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Fig. 1. Documentation of the Albanian Lapidary Survey fieldwork, 2014.
Photo by Xheni Alushi. Courtesy of the Department of Eagles.



Fig. 2. Documentation of the Albanian Lapidary Survey fieldwork, 2014.
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Fig. 3. Documentation of the Albanian Lapidar Survey fieldwork, 2014.
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Fig. 4. Documentation of the Albanian Lapidar Survey fieldwork, 2014.
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Fig. 5. Documentation of the Albanian Lapidar Survey fieldwork, 2014.
Photo by Xheni Alushi. Courtesy of the Department of Eagles.



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