

The Arbëresh: A Brief History of an Ancient Linguistic Minority in Italy

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Abstract

The article examines the historical and cultural development of the Arbëreshë, an ancient Albanian-speaking minority in southern Italy. It focuses on the migration processes of Albanians from the 14th to the 18th century, which led to their settlement in Italy, and explores the integration mechanisms that enabled the preservation of their linguistic and cultural identity. Particular attention is given to the role of the Greek-Byzantine rite and the Albanian language in the religious and cultural life of the community. The article also analyses the current challenges faced by the Arbëreshë, particularly regarding linguistic erosion and social changes brought about by modern emigration. Despite these difficulties, the text highlights the ongoing cultural solidarity among the various Arbëreshë communities.

Keywords

Arbëreshë, Italy, Albanian migration, Greek-Byzantine rite, Cultural identity, Linguistic diversity, Historiography.

Introduction

"An Anthropological Miracle" – this is how Pier Paolo Pasolini summarised the phenomenon of the Arbëresh in the 1970s, as he listened to Father Giuseppe Faraca recount the story of the Albanian migration to Italy. The reasons why this ethno-linguistic community managed to survive for centuries in a foreign-language environment (in the Italian context, the term 'alloglotto' refers to a person or community speaking a language different from the official or

predominant language of the area), while preserving their language, traditions, and cultural memory, seemed, at the time, to defy scientific explanation. Due to their complexity, Pasolini suggested that such a phenomenon might require theological interpretation. However, contemporary studies show that this is not the result of a miracle, but rather of the long-term efforts of a community that, over six centuries, has consistently reinforced its cultural identity. This process continues to capture the interest and curiosity of European scholars. This paper focuses on the evolution of this community, particularly the historiographical challenges associated with the various phases of Albanian migration between the 14th and 18th centuries, as well as the historical circumstances that enabled the Arbëresh not only to integrate into the social and cultural context of the host country, but also to retain their uniqueness without being assimilated.

Albanian migration to Italy occurred in several phases, each influenced by different historical events that affected the Balkan Peninsula before, during, and after the long Turkish-Ottoman occupation. Current knowledge, although limited by geographical and temporal scope and the scarcity or fragmentation of documentary sources, does not allow us to definitively determine the precise chronological boundaries of this migratory phenomenon, nor its actual extent and nature¹. Nevertheless, historians agree that the migratory processes from the Balkans to Western Europe, particularly from the mid-14th century southward into Italy, primarily involved Greeks, Slavs (referred to as Sclavoni or Slavoni), and Albanians, who felt the impact of the fall of the Byzantine Empire². Alongside objective causes, such as military campaigns, persecution of the local nobility, famines, and natural disasters, subjective factors can also be distinguished, such as the transition of settled populations to a semi-nomadic or nomadic way of life, which likewise shaped migration patterns³.

Archival records suggest that the first phase of migration began with the movement of inhabitants from the mountainous regions of present-day Albania towards the coast, followed

¹ A still relevant framework for describing the phenomenon and research perspectives was proposed by Peter BARTL in his article *Fasi e modi dell'immigrazione albanese in Italia (Phases and Modes of Albanian Immigration in Italy)*, published in *Rivista di storia del Mezzogiorno*, 1979, vol. 15, pp. 199–212.

² For an analytical framework on the reconstruction of widespread social disorientation in the late medieval Balkans, see Pietro Dalena and Alessandro Di Muro's work *Dalle origini al Medioevo*, in Fulvio Mazza (ed.), *La Calabria albanese. Storia, cultura, economia*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2013, pp. 25–61. The recent contribution by medievalist Pëllumb XHUFİ, *Emigracioni shqiptar në Mesjetë: një vështrim tipologjik (Albanian Migration in the Middle Ages: A Typological Overview)*, offers considerable methodological depth. It can be found in *Edhe 100! Studime në nderim të prof. Francesco Altmarit me rastin e 60-vjetorit të lindjes*, Tiranë: Albpaper, 2015, pp. 687–714.

³ See DUCCELLIER, Alain. *Le raisons d'un départ: un monde désorienté*, in Alain Ducellier, Bernard Doumerc, Brühilde Imhaus, and Jean de Miceli (eds.), *Les chemins de l'exile. Bouleversements de l'Est européen et migrations vers l'Ouest à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris: Armand Colin Éditeur, 1992, pp. 7–89.

by a phase of exile. This exile was not driven by short-term events but rather by a long-standing 'immigration policy' implemented by several European states from the late 14th century, particularly after the decimation of populations caused by plague epidemics. Economic and commercial opportunities, opened up by new geographical discoveries and a labour shortage in agriculture and maritime industries, contributed to the spread of the myth of 'felix Italia' among the colonised populations, particularly along the coast – the idea of Italy as a promised land⁴.

According to French scholar Brühilde Imhaus, co-author of a study on migration to Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages⁵ edited by Alain Ducellier, this myth should be considered among the "latent" causes of the numerous migrations that affected the Balkan population. This included both coastal inhabitants, evidently more susceptible to the allure of "foreign" merchants, and those living inland, particularly in mountainous regions, who were enticed by the prospect of changing their lives by relocating. Initially, these populations pressed upon the gates of major cities along the Adriatic coast before ultimately deciding to leave the Balkans permanently⁶.

The Western model, which took root primarily in port and commercial centres, provided solutions for the social and economic insecurity of the rural population of the Balkans, which gradually migrated to coastal areas. Although it is hard to imagine ports overcrowded with people in the last quarter of the 14th century, the sea still represented one of the main routes of emigration, although it was sometimes replaced by land routes, which were cheaper and less unpredictable.

Albanians embarked on exile through three main routes. The first led north to the port centres along the Dalmatian coast, from where they either continued overland through the northernmost parts of the Balkan Peninsula towards Venice and its territories, or boarded Italian merchant ships and headed for the opposite Adriatic coast, particularly the coast of la Marca⁷. The second route led south to Greece, particularly to the Peloponnese and Morea, to

⁴ Sergio Anselmi highlighted this important historiographical paradigm with the publication of a comprehensive volume: ANSELM, Sergio (ed.), *Italia felix. Migrazioni slave e albanesi in Occidente. Romagna, Marche, Abruzzi, secoli XIV-XVI. Quaderni di Proposte e Ricerche*, vol. 3. Ancona: Ed. di Ostra Vetere, 1988.

⁵ See IMHAUS, Brühilde. *Vers l'Italie des communes et des princes*, in *Les chemins de l'exile*, cited above, pp. 7–89.

⁶ Viz XHUF, Pëllumb. *Vështrim mbi popullsinë e qyteteve bregdetare shqiptare në shek. XII-XV*. In: *Studime për epokën e Skënderbeut*, vëll. I. Tiranë: Instituti i Historisë - Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, 1989, s. 22–31; viz MALLTEZI, Luan. *Qytetet e bregdetit shqiptar gjatë sundimit venedikas (1392-1478): aspekte të jetës së tyre*. Tiranë: Instituti i Historisë - Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, 1988.

⁷ The term "coast of la Marca" (la Marca) refers to Italy's historical Marca di Ancona on the Adriatic, simply known as the "coast of Ancona."

coastal towns and the islands of the archipelago. The third route was a direct sea passage, which more immediately allowed for reaching the opposite side of the Adriatic, especially the central and southern Italian regions. However, as previously mentioned, this route did not guarantee a successful exile⁸.

These three routes were used simultaneously; however, it cannot be claimed that their intensity was the same in all historical periods, nor that the destinations were always chosen based on economic advantage. In some cases, emigration was a voluntary and consensual decision, while in others, it was a flight driven by poverty or war.

The first route of exile was continuously used from the second half of the 14th century to the early 16th century⁹. This route was almost obligatory, with its success ensured by the strong appeal of Venice – the Serenissima¹⁰ – for the inhabitants of its colonised territories. During this period, Balkan emigrants, particularly Albanians, preferred the central and northern regions of Italy. However, this preference began to wane in the second half of the 15th century, as these areas, which had been settled and filled with new villages in previous decades, could no longer absorb further influxes of workers. This, however, is not the reason why the routes of exile began to shift more towards Greece.

From the end of the 13th century to the early decades of the 15th century, thousands of Albanians, whose numbers continued to grow, settled in the far southeastern parts of Europe, where their population reached and even surpassed that of the indigenous inhabitants. At key moments of political crises, these Albanian communities significantly influenced internal affairs in the region. The migration wave to Greece was often preceded by military incursions, but over time, it became a mass movement of entire communities that chose to settle in the south with their traditions and social systems. The ongoing Ottoman invasion frequently forced the already settled Albanian population in Greece to seek escape routes. The same

⁸ For a more analytical interpretation of the migration phenomenon, see MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Gli archivi ecclesiali e la memoria storico-culturale degli Arbëreshë. Un bilancio di tre decenni di ricerche*, in NDRECA, A. (ed.), *L'Albania nell'archivio di Propaganda Fide*. Rome, 2017, pp. 213–261; MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Mbi mërgimin arbëresh në Itali (shek. XIV-XVIII)*, in ISMAJLI, R. (ed.), *Studimet Albanistike në Itali Albanistic studies in Italy – Gli studi albanistici in Italia*. Prishtina: Akademia e Shkencave dhe e Arteve e Kosovës, 2020, pp. 129–164; MANDALÀ, Matteo. *"La più gran gioia è sempre all'altra riva". On the Albanian Migration in Italy (XIV-XVIII centuries)*, *Studia Albanica*, 2018/2, Tirana, pp. 279–361.

⁹ Regarding the Albanian presence in the Veneto region, particularly in Venice, I refer to the numerous works of Lucia NADIN, among which I would highlight the most significant contribution: NADIN, Lucia. *Migrazioni e integrazione: il caso degli albanesi a Venezia (1479-1552)*. Rome: Bulzoni, 2008. For Istria, see MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Gli Albanesi in Istria (secc. XV-XVIII)*, in *Symbiosis on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. Encounters and dialogues among cultures*. SHËJZAT, 2020, pp. 25–123.

¹⁰ Serenissima is the abbreviated name for the Venetian Republic (*Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia*), which for centuries prided itself on the title of the "Most Serene" or "Most Peaceful" Republic. This title referred to its political stability and power.

pressure was felt by their compatriots who remained in Albania and did not wish to leave their homeland. For many, the sea route was the only possible way out.

The period of this last migration wave was undoubtedly the longest, beginning in the second half of the 15th century and continuing until the second half of the 18th century. A further peculiarity of this migration, aside from the areas it affected, stemmed from the final destinations and the manner in which the exiles were resettled. The largest and most substantial waves of emigrants no longer headed for central and northern Italy but for the southern and island regions. In these areas, by the mid-15th century, economic and social conditions had either not improved at all or were undergoing a slow and gradual restructuring process, creating a more favourable environment for receiving the new and much-needed workforce.

Regardless of the general characteristics of the migration routes, which Albanians—among others—had followed for centuries, and the circumstances influencing the increase in migration flows, it is clear that the ways in which migrants were integrated changed according to the shifting conditions they faced. These changes were related to the reasons that led to the drastic transformation of their individual and social lives, and to their acceptance or rejection of a different reality in terms of mentality, customs, rules of life, language, religious worship, and social organisation. The phenomenon of migration evolved in different areas simultaneously, with local variations, but always retained its core characteristics and adaptability to changing conditions¹¹.

The integration of Albanian communities in Italy and their cultural identity

The integration process of Albanian communities in Italy experienced varying degrees of success. While in the first half of the 15th century, exoduses were primarily driven by economic emigration, the migration waves of the latter half of the century led to a warm reception, and in the case of Venice, even to active assistance projects from the Serenissima's authorities. However, the approach to newcomers was not always motivated by humanitarian principles or charitable goodwill but rather by economic interests, particularly in areas that had been decimated and depopulated following the Black Death (14th century).

¹¹ Some general aspects on this topic: *Profili storico-letterari*, in ALTIMARI, Francesco – BOLOGNARI, Mario – CARROZZA, Paolo. *L'esilio della parola. La minoranza linguistica albanese in Italia: profili storico-letterari, antropologici e giuridico-istituzionali*. Pisa: Ets Editrice, 1986, p. 1; PRENUSHI, Mikel. *Kontributi Shqiptar në Rilindjen Evropiane*. Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese 8 Nëntori, 1981.

Initial resistance to these conditions affected relations between the new settlers and the local population, which often did not understand their customs, language, or religion. Even their ethnic identity was not clearly identified, leading to frequent confusion with "Greeks," as expressed in the saying "græcum est!" (They are Greeks!). This misconception persisted until recent times, and even today, some Italians still refer to Albanians as "Greeks." This is evident, for example, in the local name "Piana dei Greci," which was changed to "Piana degli Albanesi" in 1941, but the original name is still used, similar to the town of Greci in the province of Avellino.

The Albanians from the Capitanata region were no exception to this usage. Dominican monk Serafino Razzi noted in his travel diaries that in Campomarino, "these Greeks speak Greek among themselves, but still use the Italian language," while of Chieuti he remarked that it is "also inhabited by Greeks," embarking on fanciful etymological interpretations of the town's name. This misunderstanding proved particularly dangerous during the Counter-Reformation, when the Albanian community, practising the Greek-Byzantine rite, was suspected by Catholic bishops—who lacked sufficient knowledge of Eastern traditions—of deviating from Catholic orthodoxy. These suspicions even led to accusations of heresy and schism.

Out of this situation arose a bold effort to "invent tradition," which developed within educational institutions focused on the Greek-Byzantine rite. Over time, these centres became incubators of intellectuals who played a crucial role in integrating Albanian communities and rewriting their history, documenting their customs, analysing their language, and developing literature. This process contributed to the formation of the Albanian minority's identity in Italy.

One of the first institutions to play a significant role was the Greek College of Saint Athanasius in Rome, founded in 1577 at the initiative of Pope Gregory XIII. This college welcomed students from the Albanian-speaking communities of southern Italy and formed the first Arbëresh intellectuals, including Luca Matranga, who made significant contributions to the development of Albanian literature.¹² In the early 17th century, patron Andrea Rereza founded a monastery in Mezzojuso, which during the 18th century served Basilian missionaries who provided educational services to the Albanian population, including the establishment of schools. During the pontificate of Pope Clement XI (1700–1721), whose

¹² For the history of the Greek College, see RODOTÀ, Pietro Pompilio. *Dell'origine, progresso, e stato presente del rito greco in Italia osservato dai greci, monaci basiliani, e albanesi*. Vol. III: *Degli albanesi, chiese greche moderne, e collegio greco in Roma coll'indice di tutta l'opera*. Rome: Giovanni Generoso Salomoni, 1763.

family originated from the Albanian community in Marche, greater attention was paid to the Albanian minority on both sides of the Balkans, offering opportunities for the establishment of ecclesiastical educational institutions with local leadership.

In 1716, thanks to the efforts and determination of Father Giorgio Guzzetta, the Filipino Oratory¹³ for celibate priests of the Greek-Byzantine rite was established. This institution marked the beginning of a significant period that, in the following decades, led to a cultural awakening of the Albanian communities in Sicily. Two years later, in 1718, Father Antonino Brancato, inspired by the model of the Colleges of the Holy Family promoted in Italy by Cardinal Corradini, initiated the project of Maria's College to educate young girls from impoverished families. The college was officially established between 1731 and 1733, after overcoming initial resistance, with the support of Father Guzzetta.

The *Collegio di Maria* became one of the first girls' boarding schools to provide education at a time when such privileges were reserved only for men. The young girls who attended this college gave rise to a tradition of women's garments embroidered with gold and adorned with motifs inspired by 18th-century ecclesiastical clothing. This tradition continues to inspire admiration today among those who see or wear these garments. The significance of this practice also lies in the mysterious prayers (*giaculatoria*) that older women recite while dressing.

A key turning point in the history of education for Italo-Albanian communities came in the 1730s, with the founding of the College of San Benedetto Ullano in Calabria in 1732, known as "Corsini" in honour of Pope Clement XII¹⁴. This institute played a key role in the cultural and literary history of the Albanian community in Calabria. Many students of this college made significant contributions to the development of Albanian literature and Italian history. During the Risorgimento, the Corsini College was referred to by Bourbon authorities as a "nest of vipers" due to the many patriotic movements supporting the unification of Italy that originated there.

¹³ The Filipino Oratory is connected to Saint Philip Neri, an Italian priest and founder of the Congregation of the Oratory, established in the 16th century. Its members devoted themselves to work within church communities and missionary activities, placing great emphasis on spiritual education and pastoral care. The Oratory of Saint Philip Neri became an inspiration for other similar institutions bearing his name, including the Filipino Oratory for celibate priests of the Greek-Byzantine rite.

¹⁴ For information on the Corsini College, see ZAVARRONI, Angelo. *Il Collegio Corsini di S. Benedetto Ullano* [original ed. *Historia erectionis Pontifici Collegii Corsini*, 1750]. Literal translation by Domenico Morelli. Cosenza: Edizioni Brenner, 2001; CUCCI, Maria Franca. *Il pontificio collegio Corsini degli albanesi di Calabria: evoluzione storica e processo di laicizzazione*. Cosenza: Brenner, 2008.

Four years later, in 1734, the Greek-Albanian seminary was established in Palermo, which, thanks to the foresight of Father Guzzetta, is still in operation today¹⁵. This seminary, like its sister institution, played a key role in the history of the Albanian community in Italy and the country itself. Many promising intellectuals were educated at this renowned centre, which throughout the 18th century enjoyed immense respect in Sicilian academic circles. Both institutions not only produced a significant number of intellectuals but also elevated the history, religious culture, and language of the Italian Albanians to a subject of scholarly study. The results of this research led to the creation of monumental works, such as the manuscripts of Father Guzzetta, Paolo Maria Parrino¹⁶, and Nicolò Chetta¹⁷, which rediscovered the values, myths, and symbols of national culture. At the same time, they contributed to the creation of an effective network for the dissemination of literary texts, which, thanks to the work of copyists (amanuenses), made these texts accessible to a wide readership across the five Albanian communities in Sicily. Although this literary production, long preserved in manuscripts, only reached print belatedly and partially in the 19th century, it nonetheless acquired the character of a true literary tradition.

The significance of the epochal shift represented by the founding of the aforementioned institutions for the survival of Greek-Byzantine religious culture and the Albanian linguistic identity in Sicily and Calabria can be easily inferred from the deep roots these communities still proudly maintain today. It is not easy to fully comprehend the extent of the work that the 18th-century popes had to undertake to ensure the continuity of the cultural heritage inherited from their predecessors, while also renewing and revitalising it. Only with the discovery and study of the rich manuscript production of the 18th century—including those directly or indirectly connected to it—has it been possible to reconstruct the flourishing of literary creation, which has become one of the most evocative aspects of Arbëreshë cultural history.

In the first quarter of the 18th century, the Albanian communities in Italy did not have their own historiographical tradition. Their memory and identity were entrusted to oral

¹⁵ See MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Padre Giorgio Guzzetta e le origini della costruzione d'identità arbëreshe. Hylli i Dritës*, 2015, vol. 1, pp. 374–425.

¹⁶ MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Pietro P. Rodotà e Paolo M. Parrino e la costruzione d'identità degli arbëreshë nel sec. XVIII*, in GENESIN, Monica and MATZINGER, Joachim (eds.), *Albanologische und balkanologische Studien. Festschrift für Wilfried Fiedler*, vol. I. Hamburg: Kovac, 2005, pp. 227–250; MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Paolo Maria Parrino e le origini dell'ideologia albanista*, in DI MARCO, Pietro and MUSCO, Alessandro (eds.), *Aspetti della cultura bizantina ed albanese in Sicilia*. Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, *Machina Philosophorum*, 2005, pp. 1–60.

¹⁷ See MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Nicolò Chetta. Nel bicentenario (1803-2003). Albanica 14. Collana di Albanistica*. Palermo: A.C. Mirror, 2003, pp. 7–125.

tradition, lacking historical sources that had been recorded. Their ethno-cultural and linguistic origins were unclear, and their religious practices were under constant scrutiny, at times even violent suppression by Catholic authorities. It was only with the bull *Etsi pastoralis* of 1742, which marked a turning point in the cultural history of the Arbëreshë, for better or worse, that the foundation was laid for a tradition of studies that clarified their presence in Italy, their illustrious ethnic genealogy, and their national heroes. Albanians, previously mistakenly considered "Greeks," spoke an ancient language that must not be confused with the more prestigious Greek, and their anthropological traditions proved to be equally significant, originating from pre-Greek populations of the Balkans.

Giorgio Castriota Skanderbeg, the principal defender of Catholicism during the Turkish-Ottoman wars, became the symbol of their devotion to faith and freedom. The Albanians' flight from their homeland, subjugated by "Turkish dogs" (*ai cani Turchi*), was not merely an act of escape but an expression of deep commitment to their faith and liberty. This historical process had an ecumenical dimension, as its goal was to bring back to Christ a population oppressed by Islam. It was a complex operation of historical reconstruction, initially focused on the religious question of defending the Greek rite, but it gradually acquired a secular dimension and supported a cultural process of identity-building that continues to this day in the Italian Albanian communities¹⁸.

The language and literary tradition of the Arbëreshë in Italy – loss of prestige and efforts towards preservation

The Arbëresh dialects in southern Italy are classified as part of the Albanian linguistic system¹⁹, specifically related to the Tosk dialect, which is spoken today in southern and central Albania. The language of the Arbëreshë is attested both through oral tradition (approximately fifty Albanian-speaking communities still exist) and a rich written tradition, which has given rise to significant artistic literature. In the domain of orality, phenomena such as code-switching and code-mixing, which were almost non-existent in the past or limited to borrowing a few lexical items, are now easily observed. These phenomena are confirmed by texts collected by researchers in the past, as well as by the oral transmission of folkloric

¹⁸ For these aspects, see MANDALÀ, Matteo. *Mundus vult decipi. I miti della storiografia arbëreshe*, 2nd ed. Rende, Cosenza: Università della Calabria, Dipartimento di Linguistica, Sezione di Albanologia, 2009.

¹⁹ A general but comprehensive overview of the Arbëresh dialects can be found in the valuable volume edited by ALTIMARI, Francesco – SAVOIA, Leonardo Maria. *I dialetti italo-albanesi. Studi linguistici e storico culturali sulle comunità arbëreshe*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1994.

elements. The current state of the Albanian linguistic minority in Italy is diverse, although in general terms, features of serious language erosion persist.

After World War II, due to the expansion of education, the mass use of media, and emigration to industrially developed areas (urban centres, northern Italy, northern Europe, and overseas countries), the social ties within the Albanian-speaking communities gradually began to dissolve, and the fundamental sociolinguistic communication bonds weakened. From the 1970s, these corrosive phenomena were recorded in various surveys conducted in Albanian-speaking areas of Italy, particularly in Calabria and Sicily. The current situation has significantly worsened, both due to the continued emigration of younger generations, leading to intense depopulation of rural centres, and the decline in the social prestige that the Arbëresh language once enjoyed. Many families have chosen not to pass on knowledge of their mother tongue to their children, seeing it as useless for their future or even as an obstacle to their cognitive development. This situation leads to two fundamental problems: it undermines the linguistic prestige of the community and deprives children of an important tool for understanding and interpreting the world at a critical stage of their education.

Legislative measures enacted by Law no. 482 of 1999, aimed at protecting the linguistic heritage of minorities present in Italy, including the Arbëresh minority, have proven insufficient to overcome some long-standing problems. One of the main issues is the geographical dispersion of the community across seven regions of southern Italy, which has led to uneven linguistic development and the creation of isolated language enclaves. Based on data from sociolinguistic and dialectological research, it is possible to propose didactic tools that could create a kind of 'roof language' for dialects showing significant differences. Praiseworthy efforts by many teachers in compulsory schools (kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools) have led to the creation of useful manuals on the Albanian language (Arbëresh) and culture. Two of the most important are the volumes *Udhëtimi* and *Udha e mbarë*.

Udhëtimi, created around twenty years ago, is a textbook aimed at kindergartens and the first grades of primary schools, focused on teaching the alphabet. This project was one of the first approved by the European Union, but unfortunately, it was not further developed.

The second volume, *Udha e mbarë*, is based on the work of one of the Arbëresh poets, who has been dedicated to teaching the language both inside and outside schools for many years. This text has great grammatical value because it bridges the gap between the Italo-Albanian dialects and literary Albanian. It thus serves as a tool for creating a kind of 'roof

language' to which the Arbëresh community can turn, as each of the Italo-Albanian dialects has developed its own specific form, which does not allow for their unification into a single *Mitsprache*, or common language. Therefore, it is unthinkable today to speak of a unified literary Arbëresh. In the literary tradition, each author has drawn from the dialect of their region, resulting in considerable linguistic diversity, which today presents a challenge for the unification of the dialects.

Another limitation of Law no. 482/99 concerns the optional teaching of minority languages and the lack of properly trained teachers with adequate qualifications. In the Arbëresh communities, the situation is often left to the goodwill of local authorities and teachers, who lack sufficient support and resources to prepare educational programs that meet the challenging task of preserving endangered languages.

The contemporary situation of literature in Arbëresh, throughout its historical development, is characterised by two key features: the religious, sacred motif, which has accompanied this literature from its beginnings in the 16th century to the present day, and the motif of the Risorgimento, which dominated during the Romantic period. While the latter motif is the result of intellectual and political processing, culminating in the declaration of Albania's independence (1912) and sometimes manifesting as nostalgia for the distant homeland, the first motif is a natural and instinctive expression of the historical-cultural and religious reality in which the Arbëresh found and still find the fundamental pillars of their identity—affiliation with the Greek-Byzantine rite and the use of Albanian not only in liturgical services but also in paraliturgical practices, particularly evident in the earliest phases of traditional Arbëresh literature. A third significant feature that supported the realisation of these first two was orality—the ability to preserve and transmit folk poetic traditions orally, and their presence in modern Albanian reflective literature of the Romantic period.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the results of numerous studies conducted over the past decades, which, with further research in private and public archives and libraries, continue to expand. Instead of providing an exhaustive overview of these results, for the purposes of this contribution, it was considered more appropriate to reveal deeper connections between the various historical periods and the essential dependence that the more recent phases show on the previous ones. It is also important to reconstruct the key nodes of the network through which, in the 18th and 19th centuries, conditions were created for the creation and transmission of literary culture, predominantly religious and paraliturgical, which has reached us only fragmentarily and not always in its complete form.

Arbëresh literary documents have always required, and still require, an interdisciplinary approach. This fact only enhances their value and significance. Historians and literary critics have examined them in terms of their "literariness," linguists have used their content for studies on Arbëresh dialects, philologists have reconstructed the texts to publish them in critical editions, and anthropologists have analysed the sediments of archaic culture, often delving deeper than common expectations. In this context, the work of historians of Arbëresh culture is also of significant value, as their task has been to identify the long-term cultural engagement of several generations of Arbëresh. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, they have reconstructed those activities that, since the 16th century, have gradually led to the formation and affirmation of a specific process of cultural and religious education (*Bildung*) within the Albanian communities in Italy.

Today, Albanian scholars consider it an undeniable fact that without Arbëresh literature, Albanian literature in the Balkans would not have reached the same degree of emancipation and modernity that enabled it to become an integral part of the European literary tradition.

What is most important for the Arbëresh community today, however? It is difficult to provide a definitive answer to this question, especially in the cultural sphere, as current social and economic changes bring new, serious problems. Southern Italy, and thus the Arbëresh communities, face a prolonged economic crisis, forcing many young people to migrate to other parts of Italy or Europe. This exodus not only leads to the decline of cultural and linguistic identity but also highlights economic and employment issues. This phenomenon is taking on alarming proportions and threatens the stability of small towns such as Piana degli Albanesi.

With declining birth rates, there is also an increasing risk of chain negative effects—fewer classes, fewer teachers, loss of school autonomy, and a reduction in the effectiveness of bilingual education. There is a real danger that Arbëresh, whose linguistic erosion is evident, could disappear entirely as a living language.

Despite these difficulties, there is hope for a linguistic and cultural revival. The community, despite all the obstacles, strives for growth and development, particularly thanks to its rich cultural traditions. Although the situation for Arbëresh is serious, cultural solidarity between the communities remains strong and serves as an important support in overcoming current challenges.

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