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**GEOPOLITICAL ASSESSMENT OF
CULTURAL DIFFUSION IN
THE MOSCOPOLE (VOSKOPOJA) OF THE 18TH CENTURY**

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**ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКА ОЦЕНКА НА КУЛТУРНАТА ДИФУЗИЯ
В МОСКОПОЛЕ (ВОСКОПОЯ) ОТ ХVІІІ ВЕК**

The paper “Geopolitical assessment of cultural diffusion in Moscopole of the XVIII century” is a professional effort to convey to scholars, teachers, specialists of local and central government, tourism and entrepreneurship, findings and interesting facts about Moscopole, a mountainous resort village, in the southeastern Albania. This paper deals with the concept of cultural diffusion of the medieval city of Moscopole (XVIII century).

The paper analyzes the indicators that highlight the flourishing of the city of Moscopole in the years 1750–1769 and the cultural richness that this nucleus of civilization conveyed to Albanian territories and further in the Balkans. The methodology followed is based on the research method, intertwined with information processing, comparison, and data synthesis analysis. This cultural diffusion and rich historical heritage have turned Moscopole into a model for the development of mountain tourism.

Keywords: Moscopole, heritage, cultural center, source of civilization, sustainable tourism.

Assessing geographical position in the development of Moscopole

The geographical position of Moscopole can be considered appropriate for the progress of its inhabitants. Although “the city of Moscopole has been established in a well-hidden place, where you can climb with difficulty” (Peyfuss 1998: 22), it was part of regional and important passageways and beyond.

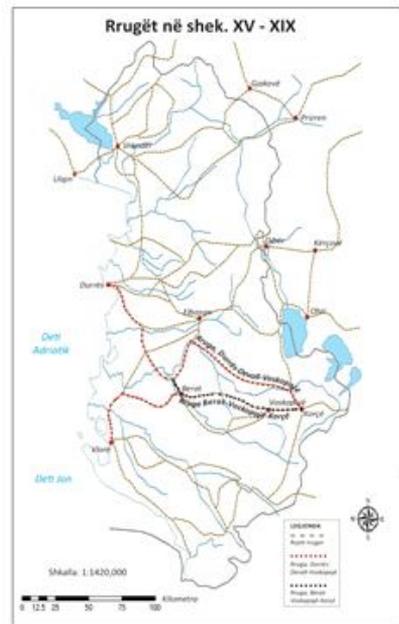
The Adriatic eastern shores flourished in antiquity. Dyrrachium and Apollonia cities were the accessing “gateways” for the interior Balkans. The Via Egnatia started from there, too. The people of Moscopole knew it very well and partly exploited its segments. Since ancient times people delivered the diplomatic mail between Venice and Constantinople through the “*Via di Moscopole*” (Adami 1983: 64). They also owned the monopoly of the tenant with their caravans from Dyrrachium to Istanbul (Adhami 1989: 36).

In the XV–XVIII centuries Moscopole was being traversed by important roads for the time such as Vlora-Berat-Moscopole-Korca, the Devoll road etc. The people

of Moscopole still maintain the toponym “*the road of Berat*” which passes through their village. They exploited the flows of the Tomorica and Devoll rivers to travel towards Berati and the ports of Vlora and Durres in the Adriatic coast. Thus Voskopoja turned into a transit station but a safe one between the east and west.

Beyond the harbor lie the trading roads of Western countries which traded with Vienna, Mischolcin, Budapest, Lajpcing and Berlin. They travelled through east for trading with their neighbours. Their main destination was Costandinople, or later Istambul as one of the main connection points among the three continents.

Moscopole’s location among mountains, supplied it with the necessary tranquility for economic development throughout turbulent periods of Ottoman invasion. Moscopole’s position between Berat (the patriarchy center) and Korca (the administrative center) created many relationships and strong bonds with these



Map1. Main roads in the XV–XVIII centuries and Berat-Voskopoja-Korçë

urban centers. Its geographical position helped flourish the economic, social and cultural life, whereas the destruction of the large medieval country of Moscopole in 1789, urged the urban development of the “fragile” town of Korça.

Time, as the main factor that emphasized the geographical position value of the largest Balkan country at its highest development, simultaneously faded down this source of civilization.

The role of geographical environment in the creation of Moscopole

Moscopole, a small village of 120 houses and 1100 inhabitants, lies in the southeast of Albania. It is located in a lithological contact pit (the magmatic and terrigenous rocks meeting point). The mountain landscape offers many attractive views. In the centre lies the plateau of Moscopole¹ surrounded by medium mountains. It opens just east to the city of Korça. The plateau, rich in summer pastures, offers ideal opportunities for livestock development. (Photo 1.)

Geographic positioning in the eastern extremities of Albania determines the formation of a not only mountain severe climate but also of continental nuance. The winter is long and fierce. Voskopoja is the meteorological station that records the second lowest minimum absolute temperature of -25.6°C at country level (Belba 1991: 46). There is found the greatest number of freezing days (131 days) in the

¹ Note: Moscopole’s plateau is 1180 m above the sea level.

whole Albania (Qiriazzi 2006: 76). The average annual rainfall in Voskopoja reaches 1009.6mm/year (Belba 1991: 46). Precipitation is mostly in form of snow, whereas winter is dominated by snow.



Photo 1. Hole of Voskopojës. (A. Belba July 2017)

Although natural barriers encountered in this settlement have hindered human development, people of Moscopole decided to live and set up their dwellings there. Moscopole's case can be an example of Vidal de la Blanche, the founder of French regionalism thesis. He states that civilization consists exactly of the fight against the nature obstacles to test human geniuses. Early inhabitants praised primary nature protection, challenging so the severity of Moscopole's unfavourable environment. Moscopolians accepted the low agriculture productivity of this territory.

Meanwhile, among the other flows that populated Moscopole were also the Vlachs. This pastoral population exploited the seasonal character of the summer rich pastures of Moscopole, which were known long time ago. They were incarnation of Professor Nicolae Jorga's formula as people who had two homelands: one for summer and the other for winter (Plasari 2000: 35).

During summer season, population increased significantly. Familiars helped herders to manage huge herds of grazing cattle. In winter most migrated together with their herds towards the western plateau which was rich in winter pastures and Mediterranean climate.

Gradually, the population which created Moscopole's identity expanded its productive activities either in the sphere of craftsmanship, transport or trading. The culmination of such development was the urban transformation of the settlement at the beginning of the XVIII century. The medieval town of Moscopole proves high level of civilization that these inhabitants achieved. It has functioned as a metropolis, which does not live simply with its own production, but with external trade, namely with a network extending internationally.

Historical Factors that enabled human emancipation

Historically, Moscopolitans used to send diplomatic mail from Venice to Constantinople (Adami 1983: 64). Such good use of that made them possible the

possession of renting monopoly fulfilled by the regular service of caravans through Durrache to Istanbul. Having recognized and used thoroughfares as well as the previous relations with Venice, people of Moscopoli were offered other developing opportunities, not to be neglected yet. The Venice requirement for new trading routes in the interior of the Balkans, which mostly influenced human development, was another crucial historical factor. As many western countries, Venice took part in the battle of Lepantos in 1571 against the Ottoman fleet. Despite Europeans being victorious, mismanagement of such victory caused Venice to lose some of its ports on the eastern coast of the Adriatic (Tivar and Ulcinj). Venice was constrained to search for other new ways to trading diffusion towards the traditional markets in the east. Moscopolitans were the only safe users of the inner roads of Balkan and Moscopole was the main transit station that could 'propel' the commercial exchange. This settlement took on the features of a powerful city, that gave to the scholars of commerce the idea of 'a country inhaling through the Adriatic' (Papahagi 1935: 93).

Conjunctures were Moscopoli's mere example of exploitation and it manifested local autonomy of extraordinary 'privileges', freedom and advantages from The Ottoman Empire itself (Haçiu 1936: 164).

Moscopolitans used the "tolerant" attitude that the Ottoman Empire had adapted to orthodoxy by the century XVIII. On the other hand, Moscopole had the privilege of being royal property, i.e. under the protection of the queen mother (Valide sultanes) (Adhami 1989: 49). The Moscopolitans were obliged to pay the annual tax of subordination, the tax on jewels and jersey tax. These taxes were a lighter tax burden in the face of the vastness of the taxes paid by all residents of the Ottoman Empire. Financial independence created real conditions for expanding the variety of economic activities.

Throughout the Ottoman Empire there was pressure on the Christian population to convert to the Islamic faith. Moscopole's existence as a territory under Valide sultan's protection excluded the city from the process of Islamization. This settlement had local autonomy. No Muslim could be placed in it and armed Ottomans could not enter his space. This settlement was to be transformed into a destination for every Christian who wanted to preserve his religious identity.

An interesting conjuncture that guaranteed the cultural development of Moscopole was the inclusion of this city under the church authority of the Ohrid Patriarchate. This Patriarchate was in rivalry with that of Istanbul. It strongly supported the demands for freedom and cultural development of all Christian populations who wanted to defend their ethnic identity. The Albanian leaders of the Ohrid Patriarchate, such as Partheni Korçari (1670–1676), and especially the first Joasfi Moscopolitan (1709–1741), played an important role in helping them. The economic and cultural boom of the city of Moscopole coincides particularly with the period of the leadership of the Ohrid patriarchate by Joa'saph. He was also the supporter of the printing press creation in 1720, the New Academy and the transformation of Moscopole into a nucleus of civilization.

Moscopole at its peak (1750–1769)

The inhabitants of Moscopole had the necessary fortitude and courage to grapple with the difficulties put in the way of developing a civilization by a harsh natural environment, and even to overcome them. It is but natural that the striking contrast between the implications of “geographical determinism”, on the one hand,



Photo 2.

Engraving of Moscopole, 1742

and the level to which the culture and civilization of Moscopole are thought to have been taken by the sheer labours of its people, on the other, should give rise to fundamental doubts concerning the history of the medieval flourishing of Moscopole: *is it nothing more than a beautiful myth or is it based on objective reality.*

If the history of Moscopole is recounted simplistically as that of a rather modest village, “hidden” in the midst of a mountainous region in southeastern Albania, out of which, a few centuries ago, a brilliant civilization suddenly came into being, then the critical

observer would surely regard the whole affair as no more than a fanciful product of the mythopoeic faculty. However, when hard facts are taken into account – and they are not, by any standards, small in number – the picture that emerges is so vividly truthful as to dispel from skeptical minds any lingering doubts as to its authenticity.

During its heyday Moscopole was spread over an area of 180 ha; it was made up of 14 districts which were connected by a network of 15 bridges built over its river and streams; it had 4 aqueducts and 25 mills. Between 1720 and 1770 its population is generally estimated to have been 15000–20000, though on this issue there is no common consensus among scholars, as some of them put the figures much higher (Adhami 1989: 76)². Whatever the exact figures, however, it is beyond doubt that during this time Moscopole was the largest city in the Albanian territories of the Ottoman Empire or even in the whole of the Balkans, and, possibly, the second largest city of the empire itself, after Istanbul.

At its peak, after 1700, Moscopole, with its 14 craft guilds and many wealthy merchants, was the most important trading and industrial centre in the Balkans. Gradually, its industrial activities expanded and diversified, while such traditional

² According to the Romanian V. Papahagi, Moscopole had 40000 inhabitants, while Weigand, who visited the city in 1889, writes that “there was no shortage of water for its 60000 inhabitants”.

pursuits as wool production and processing made way for newer and more technically demanding industries like metallurgy and its derivatives (arms production and goldsmithery, especially).

The importance of the craft guilds to the life of the city went well beyond their primary functions, as they provided the necessary financial resources for the construction of Moscopole's 24 churches, monastery, printing house, library, bookshop, hospital, orphanage, asylum and The New Academy.

Of the many stately edifices built around this time in Moscopole, the one which housed its printing press (completed in 1720) deserves particular notice. Not only was Moscopole's printing press, brought from Venice by its merchants, the second oldest in the Ottoman Empire, but, by this time, it was also the only one in operative condition (the people of Moscopole had gone to Venice to learn about the craft of typography), as the original printing press established in 1627 in the imperial capital by Cyril Lucaris had fallen into disuse (Papacostea 1932: 367). Moscopole's magnificent printing house was located in the very centre of the city, and, even though it was badly pillaged in 1769, when the whole city was brutally vandalized, more than a century later Weigand speaks of it as being "in a really good condition, near the church of St. John the Theologian" (Adhami 1989: 65). For half a century, Moscopole's printing press produced a great number of ecclesiastical and educational publications, among which particular mention should be made of various multilingual dictionaries and of the Old and New Testament which were typed "in a special Albanian script invented by the translator, Gregory the Moscopolitan" (Adhami 1989: 71).

Moscopole's library was another embodiment of its great cultural emancipation. The great treasure of books that was cumulatively gathered in the library included publications from Moscopole's own printing house, but also rare texts brought from Venice and other Western lands where Moscopolitans had travelled and lived as merchants or students. Many of the most valuable books were donated to the library by such wealthy archons like George Sinas or Gregory the Moscopolitan (head of the printing house and, later, metropolitan bishop of Durrës). Further contributions to the library came from the private collections of the city's learned patricians, scholars, merchants and craftsmen (Adhami 1989: 94).

The successive waves of destruction that engulfed the city in the second half of the eighteenth century left behind a badly plundered and burned library, from which, however, the people of Moscopole were able to salvage a number of books that were deposited in two of the city's own churches (St. Nicholas' and St. Mary's) and in the church of St. Peter in Vithkuq. A century later Weigand describes "a library-room, near St. Nicholas' church, where some 2000 books were kept" (Adhami 1989: 93).

The ravages of 1769, 1772 and 1789 notwithstanding, the Moscopolitan philanthropists, who lived abroad, continued to send home books on literature, philosophy and science, written in Greek, Latin, Italian, German, etc. The burning of the city during World War I, in 1916, saw the library's final and, this time, irrevocably

complete destruction: 1700 volumes, together with the city's codex, were burned or stolen by the French troops and other participants in the mayhem.

No account of Moscopole's cultural achievements during the eighteenth century could be regarded as even remotely adequate without a discussion of its great educational centre – The New Academy. The magnificent edifice of this scholarly institution, which was inaugurated in 1750, has been described as “the most precious of the city's treasures, the bearer of its traditions, the light of the church” (Belba 2001: 65) A prestigious high school, The New Academy could boast of a teaching staff made up of renowned scholars, bearers of the western tradition of scholarship which they passed on to their students through their textbooks and pedagogical practice. For their part, the students, in due keeping with the cosmopolitan spirit of Moscopole's civilization, had various ethnic backgrounds: a great number were Albanians from Moscopole itself, Korça, Vithkuq, Përmet, Gjirokastra, Elbasan, but there were also Macedonians, Greeks, Bulgarians, etc. The New Academy's commitment to the highest standards of scientific inquiry and to the progressive ideas of the time gained for it a great renown among the peoples of the Balkans, who came to regard it as a cultural cynosure to look up to for enlightenment.

Moscopole's “affair” with the world of books was not confined to the library, printing house and New Academy, but, surprisingly enough, involved even a bookshop, which was amply supplied with scholarly merchandise (academic textbooks and other publications) by Moscopole's own press and by the merchants who brought books from other countries.

Cultural Diffusion of Moscopole in the XVIII century

A dwelling of 30000-60000 inhabitants, plentiful of rich neighbourhoods and flourishing market places, Moscopole was depicted by the time sources as “the most splendid city not only throughout Greece, but virtually throughout the Turkish Empire” (Arabantinos 1856: 35).

Moscopole city distinguished of 24 churches and St. Prothom Monastery. The Turkish Empire did not like the church building designs. The only likely stipulation to be widely felt was that the churches “should not to be distinguished from outside by other buildings around them” (Adhami 1989: 121). Moscopolitans fulfilled that set-forth stipulation by constructing churches of exterior view in Byzantine style. Meanwhile, the value of religious objects was in their interior appearance. Wall murals and Moscopole's churches were painted by the best painters of the time such as David Selenica, Constantine and Athanas Zografos, the Korça's painters, Kostandin Shpataraku and others.

Their painting was characterized by the breakthrough from the clichés of traditional Byzantine art, inspired by the authority of the Holy Mount (Athos). The murals in the churches of Moscopoli displayed the saints with the look of ordinary people, in their traditional clothes of the time. The most beautiful example is that of the Sower, painted by David Selenica, in peasant clothes, “with a shirt, covered

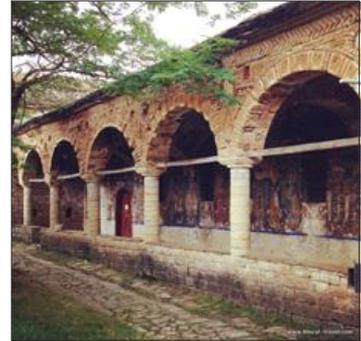
under the calves, a pair of moccasins and a felt cap on the head” (Adhami 1989: 125). Moscopoli gathered accidentally the best painters of the time, because economic prosperity guaranteed their work while the freedom of their artistic expression was unlimited. This treasury that Moscopoli created was scattered across southern Albania, and this style was to be found at the churches of Western Macedonia and Greece as well.



Photo 2. Mural fresco inside the church of St. Koll, Moscopoli.



Photo 3. David Selenica's Sower, part of frescoes in St. Koll Church, Moscopoli.



Picture 4. Outside view of St. Koll church, Moscopoli

The city rapidly added to the population becoming so a destination especially sought after by Christians persecuted by Islamism. The inhabitants of Moscopoli were ethnically homogenous (Albanians and Vlachs), while the use of Greek language in liturgy, school and commerce made cultural diversity a distinct feature of the city. Protecting their religious conscience and preserving and spreading it even after the destruction of this city in the whole Balkan space and beyond, comprises a clear expression of the functioning of the cultural diversity of Moscopoli in the nineteenth century.

In the economic field, “muscles” were corporations that linked the entire dimension of the life of their own community, from production, transportation, trading, import and social security. Moscopoli was an “oasis” in the “desert” of the Ottomanized Balkan economy. The city was a Western development model that was offered to everyone through the diffusion of trade relations.

The model of open economic development similar to that of the most developed cities of Central and Western European countries, was exported by Moscopole based on international economic-trade co-operation. Its economy was based on exploiting natural resources, providing local autonomy, the acquisition of exclusivity up to monopolies of economic and trade activities in the face of other cities competing with it. In addition, the high level of human resources qualification, the presence of corporations covering all branches of economy; cooperation with western and eastern

markets, gave this city the traits of the nucleus of civilization and its prominent social character in human development.

International trade enabled Moscopole to receive not only goods and services from the west, but also new prosperous ideas for the time. Investment over the years in the field of education transformed Moscopole into a cultural center. Moscopole, through the only printing press in the entire Ottoman Balkans, presented the intellectual production of this cultural core. Its publications were also in Albanian and soon spread throughout the Albanian territories such as Vithkuq*, Korça*, Prizren*, Elbasan*³, Ohrid***, Monastery***⁴ etc. Little is known of them because of Phanar's policy of "Hellenizing the Orthodox of Balkan and drowning out any manifestation of national culture" (Adhami 1989: 125).

Meanwhile, the New Academy was a high-level educational institution. The value of the New Academy did not stand in its architectural grandeur, but in the radiation of the knowledge it conveyed. The New Academy strongly opposed to the "normal learning cycle of the Greek world academies, by a philosophical university subject, very sensitive to innovations in the Western world.

The Moscopole Academy was the meeting point of "classicism and modernism" (Papacostea 1932: 63), and "the conservator spirit with the renewal one" (Ruffini 1942: 124). Moscopole's culture presented a wider radiating cultural diffusion than the Hellenic culture, for the New Academy diffused European illuminist philosophy. Moscopole served as a cultural core and functioned as a nucleus of civilization not only for Southern Albania, but for the whole Balkans.

Moscopole preceded the national rebirth that was "knocking" in all Balkan countries. This is accurately embedded in the conclusion reached by Prof. Alex Buddha, who says: "I do not hesitate to call this era and this movement given to Moscopole of the 18th century, an early enlightenment and a stage, which does not yet mean national rebirth, even if its beginnings, but that it certainly prepares it" (Buda 1986: 417).

Conclusions and suggestions

The geographical environment of Moscopole has not been optimal for human development. Natural difficulties were a challenge for residents who populated it. Moscopolitans chose to live here to preserve their identity. Urbanizing this settlement they challenged so the nature forces.

Economic development also conditioned progress in education and culture. Moscopole became a cultural center. It diffused culture and civilization in Albania, Balkan countries and especially in Central Europe. Cultural diffusion and historical heritage have turned Moscopole into important tourist trajectory. Moscopole is a model of mountain tourism development in Albania.

³ Albanian City

⁴ Cities with Albanian population and Bulgarian nationality

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