

ALBANIA

The Mesi Bridge at Shkodra on the Kir river

In Albania arched bridges, built in various periods, occupy an important place among historic engineering items. In the mountainous country of Albania consisting of valleys and torrential streams, the bridges of stone or with arches were an imperial necessity. These bridges were built as a result of local funding and by the labour of the local inhabitants. The oldest remains take us back to Classical times, to the 1st century BC at the time of the Roman Empire.

Because of damaging factors, the stone bridges that survive today in Albania date to the 17th century, when the Balkans were under the protection of the Ottoman Empire. There are so many bridges of different periods, which are protected by the state and have the status of 'Cultural Monument'. In the north of Albania in the Shkoder region there are several medieval bridges because of the many rivers and streams. In the north-east, a few kilometres from the town of Shkoder on the Kir river, is the Mesi bridge near the village of Mesi, from which it takes its name. This bridge is 130 m long and is one of the biggest bridges in the Balkans. From the outset, the bridge was a colossal construction with its top reaching its full height at the keystone of the main arch.

Its origin cannot be older than the 18th century and it is not on the 1688 Carouell map, which includes all the bridges in this region. Various facts link this bridge with the works by the ruler of Pchalik of Shkoder, Mehmed Pacha Bushati (the Elder) in 1768, when he also built the Leaden Mosque in the Shkodra castle.

In its ground plan, the Mesi Bridge does not follow a completely straight line, but takes a change of direction of 14 degrees towards the lower side about 5 m to the right of the big arch, enforced by the massive rocks on the river-bed.

We can see from its building techniques that the Mesi Bridge

has two construction phases. The first phase saw the building of the big central arch and three others alongside, two on the left and one on the right. In the second construction phase, the Kir river flow had outflanked the bridge and therefore the smaller arches were built at either end.

Today the bridge consists of 13 arches. The biggest is in the centre, with a span of 21.5 m, created by a double vault rib 108 cm wide. The bank is paved in river stones and is very uneven, later being reinforced with side bastions built of river stone.

Technically, the bridge has been damaged over time by devastating floods. Such conditions have resulted in floodwaters cutting away at the arches on the right side. This has caused cracks in the hang of the arch. Even the main arch has suffered from cracks that also jeopardise the bridge's stability.

The consolidation of the piers, the infill of the cracks from below and the creation of a hydrological system on the bridge in case of floods, are seen as necessary conservation actions. Doing these particular and technical works is pressing because of the eventual deterioration of this bridge.

Not implementing these works will cause damage to the very existence of this bridge, seen as cultural heritage at risk. We consider that the case of the Mesi Bridge merits being in the 2004 edition of *Heritage at Risk ICOMOS World Report of Monuments and Sites in Danger*.

The Mesi Bridge represents cultural heritage which extends beyond the national dimension. In this aim in mind, it is worth analysing it in the technical reports of international cultural organisations.

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View of the Mesi Bridge at Shkodra