The purpose of this paper is to contextualize the lapidar at Qukës–Pishkash, Librazhd, into the political and social setting of its period and beyond. In doing so, we aim, first, at presenting the monument; second, at demonstrating that lapidars were not static monuments, but rather reference points for the socio-political life of the regional and capital center; last but not least, we shall endeavor to show how Albania’s communist regime, in its understanding of the importance of pilgrimage in religious practices, attempted to establish a political religion by creating, through the lapidar at Pishkash, a pilgrimage centered at text and memory to commemorate the 1943–4 winter march of the First Offensive Brigade in the mountainous zones of Çermenikë, Librazhd, Gramsh, and Korçë, in the course of Albania’s National Anti-Fascist Liberation War. To this aim, we have assembled factual and empirical evidence regarding the monuments and combined them with socio-anthropological evidence from the study of pilgrimage.

Before delving into our enquiry, it is essential that we provide the meaning of key terms used in this paper. Eade and Sallnow view pilgrimage as a “realm of competing discourses.” For them, “the practice of pilgrimage and the sacred powers of a shrine are constructed as varied and possibly conflicting representations” by different sectors within and outside the cultic constituency, centered at the triad of “person,” “place,” and “text.” In a later volume, Coleman and Eade add “movement” as a fourth element to pilgrimage’s center, viewing it as “involving the institutionalization (or even domestication) of mobility in physical, metaphorical and/or ideological terms.” Differently from scholars who

2 Ibid., p. 9.

Fig. 1 Perikli Çuli and Agim Rada, Lapidar dedicated to the Heroic First Offensive Brigade (1978)
attach a certain religious purpose to pilgrimage, our definition approaches from a different trajectory Blasi’s view about the “ultimate or nearly ultimate concerns” in a pilgrimage and shares his belief that “not all pilgrimages are religious.” Pilgrimage, in this paper, is defined as the visitation to a place, where both the journey and its destination are believed to empower individuals or groups to create bonds with a higher state of being and contemplate on matters of life, death, and beyond. The significance of the pilgrimage’s topos has been widely recognized by pilgrimage scholars in terms of natural location “connected with striking natural features, such as mountains, caves, wells, river sources, […] mesas,” etc., which, for some, is “charged with the meaning of the sacred,” and “the presence of the supernatural.” Of equal importance is the journey to or the movement toward the pilgrimage’s topos, often purposefully long, tiring, and dangerous for cleansing and penitential purposes. The initiation, thoroughly studied by Turner and others, and/or ritual performed from the outset on the way to and/or at the place of a pilgrimage, in our definition, is a means of empowerment to create bonds with a higher state of being and contemplate on matters of life, death and beyond.

1. The lapidar at Qukës–Pishkash, Librazhd

The lapidar in question is situated about 23 km south-east of the city of Librazhd, on the right-hand side of the highway from Librazhd to Përrenjas, past the village of Qukës and at the junction to the village of Pishkash [ALS–38]. The monument (fig. 1) is situated at the base of a hill with a grove. The way to the monument is organized in three terraces mitigating the slope of the hillside and harmonizing the monument with the natural elevation. Access to the monument through these terraces is made through three rows of stairs.

The monument was made in 1978 by the then well-established sculptor Perikli Çuli and Agim Rada, a young sculptor who had just graduated from the Academy of Arts. Their selection was made through a competition for the creation of an artwork on that spot commissioned by the central government. The monument was made of locally available limestone.

The relief sculptures are carved on a partisan five-pointed star, which sets the sculptural space. The compositional solution is interesting because the partisan star is not merely the backdrop of the relief sculptures,
but could stand in itself as an artwork thanks to “its own plastic and voluminous forms.”

There is no other example in socialist realist art in which a relief basement is made in the form of a partisan star, a symbol which is often represented in various artworks, yet, is never isolated as an artwork in itself.

In spite of the five arms of the star, the lower two were left unadorned; hence, the statue takes up the remaining three arms, thereby allowing for a cross-shaped compositional synthesis. The central part of the upper arm of the cross to the central left part of the star is taken up by the figures of 12 partisan soldiers represented frontally or turning toward the right part of the sculpture, as well as a mule loaded with ammunition. Soldiers are equipped with arms and processional hats. To indicate that the soldiers are all marching in the same direction, the higher figures are rendered in low relief, contrary to the central figures, who thus appear to lead the group to war. At the central right part of the upper arm of the star there is an inscription with the date 1944. Similar conventions in subject, postures, and transition from low to high relief can be observed in the group of six soldiers led by one particular soldier at the centre of the star, as well as the group of 12 soldiers at the upper left arm of the star, the majority of which marches rightward. A fourth group of four soldiers, three of whom rendered frontally with the fourth one facing rightward, can be seen at the upper part of the upper left arm of the partisan star, above a horse loaded with ammunitions. All 27 soldiers are fully armed, some holding their rifles by their straps, the others placing their guns on their shoulders, in the fashion that shepherds do with their crooks. None of the soldiers looks directly at the viewer, they rather peer into distance and over the viewer’s head; they are rendered serious and determined, in spite of the apparently non-ceremonial march toward the war front.

The cavity of the upper right arm of the star separates the space and the sculptural mood; after all, all soldiers were eventually marching toward this arm. There the sculptors chose to render the battlefront with six soldiers placed in array, who are in turn portrayed with their guns in their hands, shooting or ready to shoot toward the enemy, or alternatively with their arms lifted to fight an enemy at close range preventing fire. The enemy should have been farther to the right and has not been represented in the monument. The omission of the representation of the enemy stressing the tension of a strenuous moment is a classical convention that had been inherited in Renaissance art, such as Michelangelo’s statue of David.

The different episodes represented by the various groups of soldiers are easy to grasp and convey in the simplest possible way, the straightforward and uncomplicated narrative. A total of 33 soldiers, 31 men and 2 women, march toward the battlefront, fought by five male and one female soldier, to reinforce the latter. The inscription below the lower right arm of the monument leaves nobody in doubt as to the event the sculpture refers to. Divided across two lines, except the first word that extends to both, the inscription, carved in capital letters, reads: “LAVDI BRIGADES [SE] PARE HEROIKE SULMUUSE” (Glory to the Heroic First Offensive Brigade).

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15 Ibid.
16 Gogollari argues that the throngs of soldiers are represented after the war, on the basis of the relaxed atmosphere (“Një Vepër,” p. 7). Yet, this fails to explain why most soldiers face right, i.e. toward the battlefront.
2. The monument’s socio-economic context

The monument is part of a series of initiatives undertaken by the communist elite of the late 1970s for the purpose of claiming a natural and symbolic space by way of establishing social reference points and “cultifying” the leading figures of the Party, such as Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu. The legendary “Hut at Galigat” (fig. 6), the Albanian equivalent of the Razliv hut and barn of N. Emelyanov, where Lenin found refuge toward the end of the summer of 1917, is one relevant example. Galigat is a village on the mountainous zone of Gramsh, where Enver Hoxha sought and found refuge in the hut of Ymer Coha in early 1944, for which the People’s Artist Avni Mula composed a song for the verses “Galigat, of Ymer Çoha in early 1944, for which the People’s Art-

cist Avni Mula composed a song for the verses “Galigat, Galigat, I’ll never forget that warm and fiery heart.” According to local inhabitants, on Enver Hoxha’s birthday (October 16, 1908), delegations from schools in Elbasan, Gramsh and nearby villages would march to the hut, which was preserved by the state as a Monument of Culture, to address speeches, perform songs, and recite poetry, i.e., the equivalent of a religious pilgrimage’s ritual.

Throughout the course of the 1970s Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu set about recording their memories from the anti-Nazi war; these memories became the basis on which a number of memoirs by Enver Hoxha were published in the early 1980s (e.g. When the Party Was Born, 1981; Laying the Foundations of the New Albania, 1984; Among the Simple Folk, 1984), albeit without

Mehmet Shehu’s name and role being mentioned, as in 1981 he was discredited as a double agent and forced to commit suicide. His name was subsequently removed from all publications and records. While the second of these books contains extensive parts of the crucial winter of 1943, when communist fighters of the First Offensive Brigade, including Enver Hoxha, were blocked under conditions of polar cold in the mountainous zone of Çermenikë, Librazhd, Gramsh, and Korçë, almost half of the third book is dedicated to stories of simple encounters of partisan fighters with peasants of the mountainous villages they were passing (e.g., at the aforementioned Hut of Galigat).

In January 1979, Prime Minister Mehmet Shehu, the 1943 commander of the First Offensive Brigade, ordered the Brigade’s reservist forces to an unmitigated restaging of the winter 1943 itinerary in the form of a military “action” (exercise). A total of 1500 reservists were mobilized in a military exercise resembling a pilgrimage in the footsteps of the former Brigade. Under extremely harsh weather conditions, poor organization and logistics, and a failure of safety plans, four persons lost their lives and dozens of others got injured. The rest of the forces were severely reprimanded or punished by Mehmet Shehu upon their failure to prove worthy of the Brigade’s history; they were moreover asked to repeat the march a few weeks later, an order that was later annulled by Enver Hoxha under the pressure of the events.

The lapidar at Qukës–Pishkash, created in 1978, should be attributed to Mehmet Shehu’s attempts to revitalize and “cultify” the memory of the First Offensive Brigade, which he led in person. After all, in July 1978 the long-brooding Sino-Albanian split reached a climax and Albania entered into a long period of self-isolation; China, a major trade and technology partner for Albania, after the latter’s split from the USSR, ceased

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sending specialists to Albania in 1978 and suspended all economic and military agreements. In order to address any discontent that must have been felt because of the sudden disappearance of China in Albania as well as to prepare the people for the painful path of self-imposed autarchy, Mehmet Shehu and Enver Hoxha were forced to turn back to recent communist history and invest in the memory of events in which the lesser partisan forces defeated superior German military, in a kind of “can do” message.

The endeavor was not easy. By the end of 1970s the generation that had resisted fascism from the lines of communist partisans, or what was left of it, was gradually aging. The new generation did not have an immediate association with these past events. There was, therefore, an inevitable need to reconnect such pages of the past with the new generation, which was the reason that the new text-and-memory pilgrimage was established. The lapidar under consideration must have undoubtedly been a spot in which multiple communism-related rituals must have taken place, utilizing the lapidar as pilgrimage center. As we will show in the following section, this problem of disconnection between the past event and the new generation was as old as Christianity itself, which was often looked upon as a model.

3. The Christian origin of pilgrimage centered at text and memory

From the time of its origins early Christian teaching understood that those who had been baptized into Christ had “put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). Yet, this immediately presented a problem, as the vast majority of Christianity’s growth and development had taken place after the life, death, and resurrection of Christ himself, and, therefore, during a period in which he – as their founder and leader – was no longer bodily and historically present. The problem became only more compounded by the gradual death and disappearance of the Apostles and other eyewitnesses. The Christian solution to this problem was resolved in the understanding that the Church’s sacraments (mysteria) made possible the identification with Christ through an immediate and mystical participation in his life. This was of course reflected fundamentally in Paul’s teaching that Christians were to grow forth as “branches” (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12; John 15:1-8). In other words, given Christ’s physical absence, Christians looked at the sacraments as mystical means of sharing timelessly in his life; and it was by those means that they most strongly identified and united themselves with him.

This provided a powerful and effective medium through which all subsequent generations could exercise equal ownership over Christ’s life, work, and teaching: something which was – according to the Epistle to the Hebrews – “once for all” (Heb. 10:10).

Such a timeless and eternal perspective on the life and work of Christ paved the way for a sophisticated symbolic approach to all Christian rituals and rites. This was no more clearly demonstrated than in the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. Meanwhile, the eucharistic meal was at the same time founded on the pattern in the Biblical text, where Christ had instructed his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The recollection of Christ as a central feature of the eucharistic celebration eventually led to Christians identifying the eucharistic ritual itself, along with its various elements, with the life and work of Christ in certain secondary and illustrative ways. The eminent Orthodox liturgist Fr. Alexander Schmemann has recently attributed such illustrative tendencies to a degradation of the symbol as a powerful and immediate manifestation of the reality, yet this does not nullify the fact that the illustrative aspect of the various elements of the ritual and rite in Eastern Christianity in fact reinforced a sense of timeless participation between the community and their savior Christ. This in turn created a kind of motionless and timeless pilgrimage whereby the members, by reenacting and reliving the events of the Christ’s life in an immediate way, attempted to share more directly in those events for which they were not themselves historically and bodily present.

In doing so, it facilitated a sense of


25 For a more detailed explanation on how Orthodox Christians see themselves as actually sharing and participating in the life of Christ see: Behr John, The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death (Crestwood: svs, 2006).


27 Gabrielle Spiegel has written an excellent piece in which he makes a very similar connection to Judaism’s use of liturgy and its consequent effect on time. In it he explains that “…for Jews, historical experience is incorporated into the cyclical reenactment of paradigmatic events in Jewish sacred ritual. Recent or contemporary experiences acquire meaning only insofar as they can be subsumed within Biblical categories of events and their interpretation bequeathed to the community through the medium of Scripture, that is to say, only insofar as they can be transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happening. In such liturgical commemoration, the past exists only by means of recitation; the fundamental goal of such recitation is to make it live again in the present, to fuse past
ownership and strengthened Christian identity and the bond between the believers across all ages.

Moreover, this kind of symbolic and illustrative approach to the life of Christ extended into other later practices such as the procession of the epitaphios (or burial shroud) on the evening of Good Friday and the practice of pilgrimage to the shrines of various Christian saints. Pilgrimage in this way further reflected the community’s desire to share in the life and events of its various heroes by reenacting and recreating those events and myths. This was done through a subtle process of text and memory, but also quite frequently through an attempted proximity to those objects or locations which were considered by the community to be sacred or significant.

4. The appropriation of Christian pilgrimage by the Albanian communist regime

Albania’s communist regime under Enver Hoxha has been responsible for a ban on all religious activities by 1967. Enforced by the Marxist–Leninist view of religion, Enver Hoxha adopted the radical Maoist approaches from the Cultural Revolution to deal with religion. In the course of the years 1966–7, the regime undertook a systematic effort to eradicate all religious customs and monuments, as remnants of backwardness in the country; in parallel to this, all religious activities were banned and Albania proclaimed itself the first atheist state worldwide (Article 37 of the 1976 Constitution).28

Surprising, however, was the fact that the communist state, instead of effacing everything resembling religion, transsubstantiated Christian pilgrimages to communist pilgrimages retaining the form, structure and typology of Christian pilgrimages, thereby crossing over rigid ideological barriers.29 Re-written in 1981 under utmost censorship controls, the second edition of the History of the Labor Party of Albania devotes a section on “the

and present, chanter and hearer, into a single collective entity. History, in the sense that we understand it to consist of unique events unfolding within irreversible linear time, is absorbed into cyclical, liturgical memory.” From Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,” History and Theory 41 (May 2002), pp. 149–63.


29 Polina Tšerkassova who deals with a similar theme from Estonia (Polina Tšerkassova, “Sterilisation and Reconstruction of the Places of Secular Pilgrimages: Moving Monuments, Meanings and Crowds in Estonia,” in John Eade and Mario Katic, Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders [London: Ashgate, 2013], ch. 5) prefers the use of the term “secular pilgrimage,” where I use “communist pilgrimage” and the terms “sterilization” and “resacralization,” where I use “deconstruction” and “reconstruction.”

movement against religion, religious biases and backward customs,” in the frame of the Party’s war for the further revolutionalization of the country’s life (1966–1971).30 Referring to the post-1967 radicalization of the communist Party’s policy toward religious activities, the Institute of Marxist–Leninist Studies by the Central Committee of the Labor Party of Albania boldly admitted that, due to devotional resistance, especially in the countryside, uprooting religious worldviews and convictions had neither been achieved, nor aggressively pursued for the sake of not offending “the feelings of a mass of workers” and that the communist party pursued a policy of assimilating religious feasts and customs providing them a norm and flavor of socialist content.

There are stunning similarities between this policy and the way Christianity struggled to transsubstantiate paganism in earlier times, as evidenced in, for instance and amongst others,31 a letter of Pope Gregory I (d. 604) to Abbot Mellitus, as recorded in Venerable Bede’s (d. 735) ecclesiastical history. These similarities become strikingly apparent once we read this letter alongside a fragment from the History of the Labor Party of Albania.

[T]he temples (fana) of the idols among that people ought not to be destroyed at all, but the idols themselves, which are inside them, should be destroyed. Let water be blessed and sprinkled in the same temples, and let altars be constructed and relics placed there. For if those temples have been well constructed, it is necessary that they should be changed from the cult of demons to the worship of the true God, so that, while that race sees itself that its temples are not being destroyed, it may remove error from its people’s hearts, and by knowing and adoring the true God, they may come together in their customary places in a more friendly manner. And because they are accustomed to killing many oxen (boves) while sacrificing to their demons, some solemn rites should be changed for them over this matter. So on the day of the dedication, or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are placed there, they should make huts for themselves around those churches that have been converted from shrines, with branches of trees, and they should celebrate the festival with religious feasting. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for eating in praise of God… It is doubtless impossible to cut out from


31 For another example, see Leviticus 17:1–9.
their stubborn minds everything at once... Thus the Lord made himself known to the Israelites in Egypt; yet he preserved in his own worship the forms of sacrifice which they were accustomed to offer to the devil and commanded them to kill animals when sacrificing to him (Leviticus 17:1–9). He thereby changed their hearts... yet since the people were offering them to the true God and not to idols, they were not the same sacrifices.

The Party and the State did not ban religious beliefs [...] albeit essentially reactionary [...] The Party could not offend the feelings of a mass of workers, especially in the village, who maintained strong ties with the Party and the popular power, but continued to believe in one or another religion, albeit without excess fanaticism. The uprooting of religious worldviews would follow as a result of the ideological convictions of the masses. [...] Albania thus became the first place in the world without churches and mosques, without priests and without hodjas. While supporting the popular movement of the war against religion, the Party cautiously directed it. It did not allow any distortions to be made and pushed aside in a timely fashion every rushed deed that was not based on the will of popular masses. It oriented the people to replace feasts and other customs related to religion with new customs and norms of socialist content. Massive actions to destroy religious bases were accompanied by dense clarificatory and atheist-scientific work by the party. [...] The vanishing of churches and mosques had not eliminated religion as worldview. Religion has very deep roots, it is intertwined [...] with backward customs originating from distant centuries and operating over very long a time [...] “We must be realistic, – stressed comrade Enver Hoxha, – the war against the customs, the traditions, old norms, against religious worldviews... has not finished. This is a long war, complex and difficult.”

The juxtaposition of the two sources indicates five striking commonalities:
1. The partial destruction or vanishing of the old customs (idols or churches).
2. The switch of “worship” from “the cult of demons” or “reaction” (elsewhere mentioned as “poison,” “backwardness,” “ideology of exploiting classes,” “socialism’s enemy,” “people’s opium,” etc.), to “the worship of the true God” or socialist customs and norms.
3. The caution that this endeavor be gradual and non-violent, in order for “that race [to see] itself that its temples are not being destroyed,” thereby avoiding offending “the feelings of a mass” of people or workers.
4. The awareness of the difficulties of the “conversion” process, as “[i]t is doubtless impossible to cut out from their stubborn minds everything at once,” in view that “religion has very deep roots,” hence, substantiating it requires “a long war, complex and difficult.”
5. The recognition that the sole manner to accomplish this end is to win “their hearts” by “dense clarificatory and atheist-scientific [in the case of the communist regime] work,” so that “by knowing and adoring the true God [or the teachings of the communist party], they may come together in their customary places in a more friendly manner.”

Regardless of whether or not the Albanian communist party had deliberated on Jesus’s “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Mt. 5:17), it seems that, as devoid from religious influences as they could be, communists understood the liminality of religious manifestations and used them from the outset for their own ends. In Enver Hoxha’s description of the early formative years of the communist party in the course of anti-fascist resistance (from 1942 onward):

During this period the Party [...] had to carry out a similar study in regard to religious beliefs in Albania. We analysed the religious beliefs in two directions: the concrete influence of religion among the broad masses of the people, and the danger from the religious hierarchy [...] So, the Party had the question of religious beliefs at the center of its attention during the whole period of the National Liberation War, but also after the war, because in order to arouse the people to fight for the liberation of the Homeland and build a new Albania we had to avoid hurting their feelings. [...] In the face of this imperative duty all the differences in ideological convictions and political sympathies, religious and regional differences, had to take second place...
cal robes to become a member of the communist party, Enver Hoxha’s response was firm:

[Y]ou should stick to the robes you wear […], because we have to respect the sentiments of believers and utilize the sympathy which the people have for you and the tekke of Martanesh. So, since you are resolutely for the war and love the Party, respect and apply its line, we will admit you as member of the Party.35

In this frame, it is not surprising that the Albanian communist regime studied the utility and functions of Christian pilgrimage and was able to appropriate much of its structure. It is based on these that we endeavoured to demonstrate in this paper that the lapidar in Qukës–Pishkash and the attempted 1979 massive text-and-memory-centered pilgrimage attempted to imitate such religious pilgrimages.