

Grazhdan's Castle, Dibra, Albania: The Significance of Investments in Regional Economic Development

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Abstract:

This article delineates the significance of investments in fostering the economic development of the Dibra region in Albania, with a specific focus on Grazhdan's Castle as a potential tourist and cultural landmark. Dating back to Late Antiquity, this castle stands as an undiscovered treasure. Assessing its historical and prospective value within the regional context is pivotal in gauging the necessity for infrastructure investments and the promotion of Dibra's natural and cultural assets.

The article contends that investing in this locale can bolster tourism, spur economic growth, and mitigate unemployment. Through an examination of Grazhdan's Castle's historical background and the prevailing economic landscape, the proposal for investments aims to harness the area's tourism potential for the betterment of the local populace and economy.

Investments in regional economic development hold exceptional importance in fostering prosperity and societal progress. Such investments directly influence gross domestic product (GDP) growth, job creation, infrastructure enhancement, and the improvement of citizens' quality of life.

This article advocates for prioritizing investments in this area to capitalize on its natural and cultural endowments for the economic advancement of the country.

Keywords: Grazhdan's Castle, Economic Development, Investments, Cultural Assets, Late Antiquity.

INTRODUCTION

The acknowledgment of Cultural Heritage and its artifacts in Albania has been a protracted and arduous journey since the 1990s, marked by a pervasive trend of historical degradation and neglect. The imperative for recognition stemmed not only from the nation's identity and the imperative to transmit it to future generations but also from the imperative for economic development in certain areas of Albania that lacked alternative means to alleviate poverty. Tourism, positioned as a primary sector of the economy, hinges on this heritage, interwoven with the country's historical narrative. The dearth of investments and promotion in a substantial portion of this heritage has not only led to the erasure of our history but also entrenched poverty in these regions, exacerbating unemployment and the exodus of young people.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this paper is to underscore the imperative and significance of raising awareness among Albanians regarding the existence of this heritage. Combined with increased investment from state institutions in the future, this awareness

campaign can significantly impact the reduction of unemployment, the prosperity of these areas, and the development of tourism as a crucial economic factor.

1. The initiation of investments from state institutions and targeted funding from specific groups would facilitate advancements in research and shed light on new data, which could hold significant importance for the entire country.
2. These investments would create employment opportunities for many young people, particularly unemployed young archaeologists. Furthermore, the unveiling of new data would enhance media and social network promotion, further piquing the interest of various demographic groups, including local and foreign tourists, especially with the regulation of the Arbër Road, encouraging visits to the area.
3. The influx of tourists and visitors would stimulate the establishment of new businesses, accommodation structures, and employment opportunities for local youth and residents. Decreasing unemployment and enticing emigrated residents to reinvest in their hometown would contribute to the economic development of the area and beyond.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF DIBRA

Dibra is a region situated in north-eastern Albania, renowned for its abundant cultural heritage and natural splendour. Economically, Dibra encounters numerous challenges, yet it also harbours substantial potential for growth and development.



Figure 1: Dibra County

Dibra, the poorest county in Albania, also boasts the highest birth rate. Despite its abundant natural resources, they have failed to uplift the region's economy. Regrettably, Dibra ranks at the top for outmigration of residents, particularly among young people.

Data from the Institute of Statistics reveals that in 2019, three counties experienced economic decline, with Dibra leading the list at 3%, followed by Kukës at 2.8% and Berat at 2%.

Moreover, Dibra is among the three counties with the lowest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the nation. According to the latest available data, this indicator for the northern county stands at 42.1 thousand new lek, below the national average of 57.9 thousand new lek (Albanian currency). Despite its abundance of natural resources

compared to other counties, Dibra exhibits high levels of internal migration, attributed by experts to deepening poverty.

1. External Perspective

1.1 The GDP per capita in Dibra County is approximately 60% of the national average, making it the lowest among all counties.

1.2 Dibra is primarily characterized by agriculture.

2. Factors Contributing to the Present Situation

2.1 Limited opportunities and weak connections to national markets render the county less competitive.

2.2 Government policies concerning natural resources have not favored economic development in Dibra.

2.3 Despite financial support for the agricultural sector from government subsidies and foreign foundations, the county still requires investment in this sector.

3. Regional Development Strategy of Dibra

The inequitable distribution of economic weight among these three counties results in fewer investments, limited job opportunities, reduced purchasing power, and consequently, increased poverty. This is corroborated by additional statistics from INSTAT, indicating that Elbasan, Dibra, and Kukës have the highest number of families benefiting from economic aid.

The SWOT analysis of Dibra County is based on its opportunities and strengths, with the main findings outlined as follows:

- The region faces constraints due to its peripheral geographic location, challenging terrain, and distance from major international and national roads. Consequently, the region experiences low population density, with a continuous loss of population over time. Halting this trend is essential to preserve development prospects.
- Several notable development opportunities arise from the construction of major national roads, which will enhance access to larger markets, leading to an influx of people, companies, and investments.
- The region boasts significant advantages, including biodiversity and pristine natural areas, which can facilitate expansion in agricultural production and promote tourism, particularly mountain/nature tourism. There is also potential for therapeutic/regenerative tourism, such as spas. The area abounds in natural and cultural resources, including picturesque landscapes, rivers, monuments, and mineral deposits. Effective planning, capacity building, and networking are imperative to leverage these advantages.

GRAZHDAN'S CASTLE

The Grazhdan Castle, located in such a significant position and believed to have played a pivotal role during its presumed historical period, stands as an extraordinary treasure.



Figure 2: Grazhdan's Castle

Initially, the Citadel of Grazhdan came to prominence through the writings of Johann Georg von Hahn (1811-1869), an Austro-Hungarian diplomat and philologist, who mentioned the Grazhdan Castle in his book "Journey from the Danube to the Drin," which also sheds light on Albania. Little was known about its history and its role during its construction period. Subsequently, this hub of historical and archaeological significance was designated a Cultural Monument by the Rectorate of the University of Tirana on January 15, 1963, and by the Ministry of Education and Culture on June 10, 1973.

The castle derives its name from the village of Grazhdan where it is situated, but it is believed to have been called Dobera in Antiquity. The construction of new fortifications and the restoration of old ones spanned the entire late antiquity period, reaching its zenith during the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565). In many of the late antiquity structures, particularly in the defensive walls, two primary construction phases are typically encountered, with the latter occurring during the era of Justinian. This phase aimed not only to repair the earlier walls but also to increase their thickness.

Following a prolonged hiatus due to limited information regarding its significance, excavation efforts resumed in 1982-83, coinciding with the construction of a motorway that unearthed numerous graves containing medieval artefacts.

Regarding the ancient name of this fortress, several theories have emerged. The first theory, proposed by archaeologist Prof. Dr. Luan Përzhita, suggests that the Grazhdan Castle may be linked to the fortress of Deyfrakos, a toponym from which the current name of the region, Dibra, is believed to derive. The second theory, supported by historians Hilmi Sadikaj and Kristo Frashëri, along with archaeologist Apollon Baçe, posits that this castle represents the ruins of the ancient city of Dobër, from which the name of the Dibra region is also thought to originate.



2.1. History of Excavations at this Fortress

The Grazhdan Castle boasts 44 towers and spans an area twice the size of Butrint and Byllis. The central area of this fortress, encircled by 18 additional castles, is occupied by the city of Grazhdan itself due to its vastness. Covering 34 hectares and surrounded by walls with a perimeter of 3000 meters, it ranks among the largest cities of late antiquity in Albania.

This fortification follows the Roman Castrum type and, due to its substantial dimensions, can be deemed a "Grand Castrum," primarily serving military purposes. Chronologically, the castle dates back to the first phase of imperial activity in the Balkan provinces, which is associated with the end of the 3rd century and the onset of the 4th century AD. Written literature mentioning or discussing the Citadel is scarce, if not entirely absent. Consequently, archaeology remains the primary avenue for uncovering further facts about it.

Research at this center resumed in the 2000s, revealing previously unknown architectural elements detailed in publications concerning this center. These elements include changes in the planimetric forms of entrance buildings, towers, and the overall fortification line, thus offering a fresh perspective on the city plan. However, following this period, the monument suffered destruction due to natural erosion, resulting in the loss of a portion of the wall on its northern side. From 2000 to 2004, excavations were conducted along the wall's course and at both of its main entrances to verify the existing planimetry.

It is understood that settlements or castles represent a continuation of previous life in the area. The same applies to the Grazhdan Castle, where ancient traces of the Dibra circle are discovered within its ruins. Here, prehistory intersects with Illyrian civilization, Hellenism blends with Roman culture, and transitions into the early Middle Ages. The Illyrian urban period (4th-1st century BC) is evidenced by earlier traces, though still scantily known. Objects from this era have been unearthed in the villages of Grazhdan in this region, representing Illyrian settlements with a rural character dating back to the 3rd-2nd century BC. Additionally, a significant number of reused square blocks from the Hellenistic period have been discovered within the fortification walls of the Citadel of Grazhdan. However, due to funding issues and negligence from relevant authorities, expeditions to this vital archaeological site have been interrupted.

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. DR. GJERAK KARAIKAJ, FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL MONUMENTS

1. Why have the works on this castle been continuously interrupted? What information do you have about the castle, and how accurate is the claim that it is among the largest castles in the Balkans?

"Among the castles of this period, namely late antiquity (4th-6th century), the Grazhdan Castle is the second largest in the territory of Albania, following Durres. The surrounding walls of Durres, constructed in the 6th century, encompassed the largest area of all historical periods. Considering the shape of the towers, gates, construction techniques, and the choice of terrain, it appears that the castle was built in the 4th century. However, the exact purpose for which this castle was constructed remains uncertain due to limited archaeological research. The interruption of the works is primarily due to a lack of funds."

2. What purpose has this castle served?

“The Grazhdan Castle remains shrouded in mystery. Its size and irregular shape pose challenges in determining its purpose. For instance, it is unclear whether it functioned as a city or a military garrison. However, the discovery of a significant number of reused square blocks suggests the presence of a settlement within the castle enclosure dating back to an earlier period of Roman development, resembling the Elbasan Castle (Scampia), Albania. To unveil answers, archaeological excavations must be ongoing, with a focus on surveys to uncover additional details.”

3. How will further discoveries in the castle affect the regional development of Dibra?

“The Citadel of Grazhdan holds significant potential for regional development. The accessibility provided by the Arbër Road has made it easily reachable, thereby expanding opportunities for both local visitors and tourists from abroad. With proper attention, this could have a positive impact on the local economy by generating new job opportunities and enhancing the area’s appeal to tourists.”

4. What suggestions can you offer?

“It is crucial to commence intensive archaeological excavations at the castle, with a focus on cleaning the surrounding walls. Initially, efforts should be directed towards implementing measures to halt the erosion of debris, which poses a significant threat leading to wall collapses. Additionally, there is a need to establish dedicated facilities for archaeologists, laboratories, and a museum to showcase the discovered artifacts. A feasibility study should be conducted to assess the relationship between investments and revenues, considering both cultural and economic benefits. Lastly, it is imperative to engage specialists and local labor forces to ensure timely results and foster tourism development in the area.”

THE QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING AWARENESS AMONG ALBANIANS ABOUT THIS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

To better understand the likelihood of access and engagement among interviewees regarding the reasons that could lead to increased visitation to these areas.

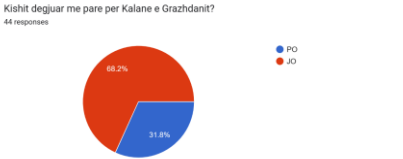
Table 3-1: Questionnaire on the awareness of Grazhdan Castle among different age groups and the desire to visit it. Key questions and reasons for inclusion.

Question	Answer Options	Reasons for inclusion in the questionnaire
Have you heard of Grazhdan Castle?	a. Yes b. No	To gauge the awareness levels of individuals across different age groups regarding this Cultural Heritage.
What was the reason for the lack of information?	a. No Promotion b. Lack of Interest c. Both	To comprehend the likelihood of access and better engage interviewees with the reasons that could lead to increased visitation to these areas.
What factors would make a visit to this site more attractive?	a. Good infrastructure b. Proximity to the capital c. Historical significance of the site d. Improved promotion	

Questionnaire Results

Online networks, media, the growing emphasis on tourism in recent years, and the inclusion of Cultural Heritage in some curricula have provided more opportunities for young people and older age groups to become acquainted with this aspect of Albania’s

cultural treasures. Graph 3.1 illustrates a notable difference in the responses of interviewees between those who were previously unaware or had never heard of this significant cultural site and those who may reside in the surrounding areas and responded affirmatively that they are familiar with it.



Graph. 3.1.



Graph. 3.2.

From Graph 3.2, respondents aged 18-50 were questioned about the reasons for the lack of information about this castle. The results are clearly depicted in Graph 3.2. A significant portion, 38.6%, cited the lack of promotion of this site, which they had never heard of before. Even those residing in the surrounding areas of Dibra were uninterested in visiting it due to its condition and the absence of any attractive features to make the trip appealing. Another segment, 29.5%, indicated that they lacked interest in these sites because they did not receive sufficient cultural exposure from their families to be acquainted with them.



Graph.3.3.

From Graph 3.3, a significant difference in responses is observed, with the majority of interviewees expressing that promotion of this site by the media and prior knowledge of its historical significance are necessary to make the visit attractive. This is expected to result in a noticeable increase in visitors, not only among locals but also among foreign tourists who have always been interested in historical sites.

The accessibility of Grazhdan’s Castle may experience a considerable increase in the future due to several important factors. Firstly, the construction of the Arbër Road and Dibra-Peshkopi Road will improve access to this area, making the castle more accessible to both local and foreign tourists. With better infrastructure and easier travel, a significant increase in the number of visitors is expected. Secondly, initiatives to improve the legal status of the castle, including the establishment of a dedicated sector within the regional directorate of the Institute of Cultural Monuments of Dibra,

and the creation of tour guides to provide explanations and guidance, will also help boost visitation. This will ensure that the castle is well-maintained and effectively promoted to attract more interest from visitors.

With increased accessibility and effective promotion of this significant historical tourist attraction, it can be anticipated that the Castle will emerge as a preferred destination for tourists, thereby contributing to the development of cultural tourism in the Dibra region and beyond in Albania.

CONCLUSION

The castles of Albania represent treasures of Cultural Heritage and possess extraordinary tourist potential. These historical structures are renowned for their architectural and historical significance, offering breathtaking views and reflecting the history and culture of their respective periods. They serve as a rich resource for tourism development and have the potential to generate economic revenue for the local communities.

According to a report from the World Bank in May of this year, Lezha and Dibra are among the cities with the highest unemployment rates in the region. The primary causes cited are the significant outflow of emigration and an aging population. The Dibra region boasts numerous natural resources, both above and below ground, including the Peshkopia Baths situated in the "Healing Valley," the Canyon of the Healing Valley, the tourist village of Rabdisht, Lake of Lura, and more. With its picturesque landscapes surrounded by towering mountains and abundant hydrography, the area presents ample opportunities for tourism. The presence of mineral springs holds promising economic potential and could contribute to reducing unemployment in the region. However, realizing this potential requires immediate investments in infrastructure and the promotion of its inherent values.

Dibra is a treasure trove, boasting not only natural but also cultural assets. Just over 2 hours from the capital, the Dibra area is a rich marvel not only in nature tourism, culinary delights, and curative tourism, but also in cultural tourism - a draw for many foreign tourists.

It's disheartening to learn that Dibra is listed among areas with the lowest economic development and the highest unemployment rates, despite its richness and diverse tourism offerings. This situation is solely due to the lack of investments. That's why this article delves into the Fortress of Grazhdan, initially providing information on its current state and its historical-cultural significance, not only for the local area but also for the broader history of the country.

With the completion of the Arbëri Road, which nearly passes by the ancient city of Grazhdan, this site could become an attractive destination for both foreign and local tourists, as well as for students of archaeology and architecture. The site holds significant archaeological, historical-cultural, and engineering value. Further investments in infrastructure and funding for ongoing discoveries in the Fortress are essential. While the total expenses may seem substantial, they are negligible compared to the potential revenues the area could generate from tourism in the future. It is imperative for institutions to act promptly.

Tourists could enjoy a 2-3 day package or even longer, allowing them to visit the mineral springs renowned for their therapeutic properties, indulge in the region's rich cuisine, and explore the Fortress of Grazhdan to learn about the area's history and cultural heritage.

This castle remains an undiscovered treasure that could bring significant benefits to the culture, tourism, and economy of Albania. Achieving this requires the continuous dedication of archaeology specialists to uncover new findings, alongside sustainable investments in studies and restoration projects.

Some of the attractions in the Dibra region that are located near this place and can serve well as part of the tourist packages offered in the area include:

1. Halil Dars Bridge, Klos - 0.8 km - Cultural Monument
2. Hoxha's Stone Bridge, Guri i Bardhë - 0.4 km - Cultural Monument
3. Skanderbeg's Castle, Guri i Bardhë - 9 km - Cultural Monument
4. Ruins of the Suç Church - 0.1 km - Cultural Monument
5. Elmaz Korbi's Tower, Guri i Bardhë - 8.5 km - Cultural Monument
6. Sali Likursi's Tower, Gurrë e Madhe - 5.6 km - Cultural Monument
7. Mehmet Sata's Tower, Suç - 0.7 km - Cultural Monument
8. Balgaj Lakes, Kurdari Suç - 15.5 km - Natural Resource
9. Sugzë Mountain, Gurrë e Vogël - 12.5 km - Natural Resource
10. Koçi Rripë Lakes, Gurrë - 5.7 km - Natural Resource

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