

**Community Initiative Programme  
INTERREG IIIA GREECE-ITALY 2000-2006  
Intervention Program 11  
Priority Axis 003: Environment and Cultural Heritage  
Measure 002: Promotion, Restoration and Development of the Historical and  
Cultural Environment of Common Interest**

## *Mother Language over the History*

### **Premise**



**Laboratory of Knowledge & Intelligent Computing  
Department of Informatics & Telecommunications' Technologies**



**T.E.I. of EPIRUS**



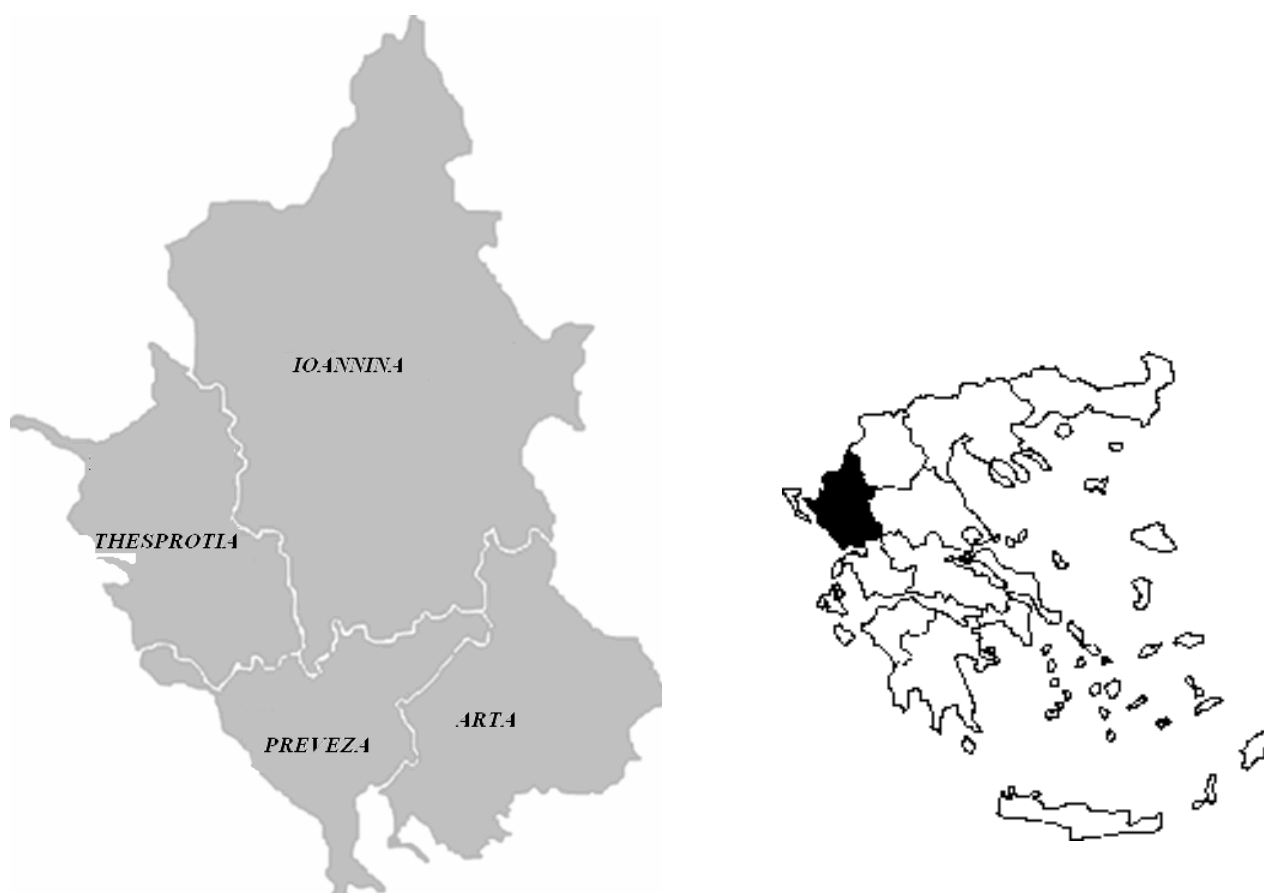


## PREMISE

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### 1. Introduction to the Region of Epirus

The Region of Epirus is one of the 13 regions of Greece and includes four prefectures: the **Prefecture of Arta, Thesprotia, Ioannina** and **Preveza** and occupies an area of 9.203 kms<sup>2</sup> in the North-West part of Greece which faces the Ionian Sea to the West, borders with Albania to the North-West, with Thessaly to the East and the Aitolokarnania in the South. Its population amounts to 336.392 residents<sup>1</sup>, i.e. 3,08% of the country's population.



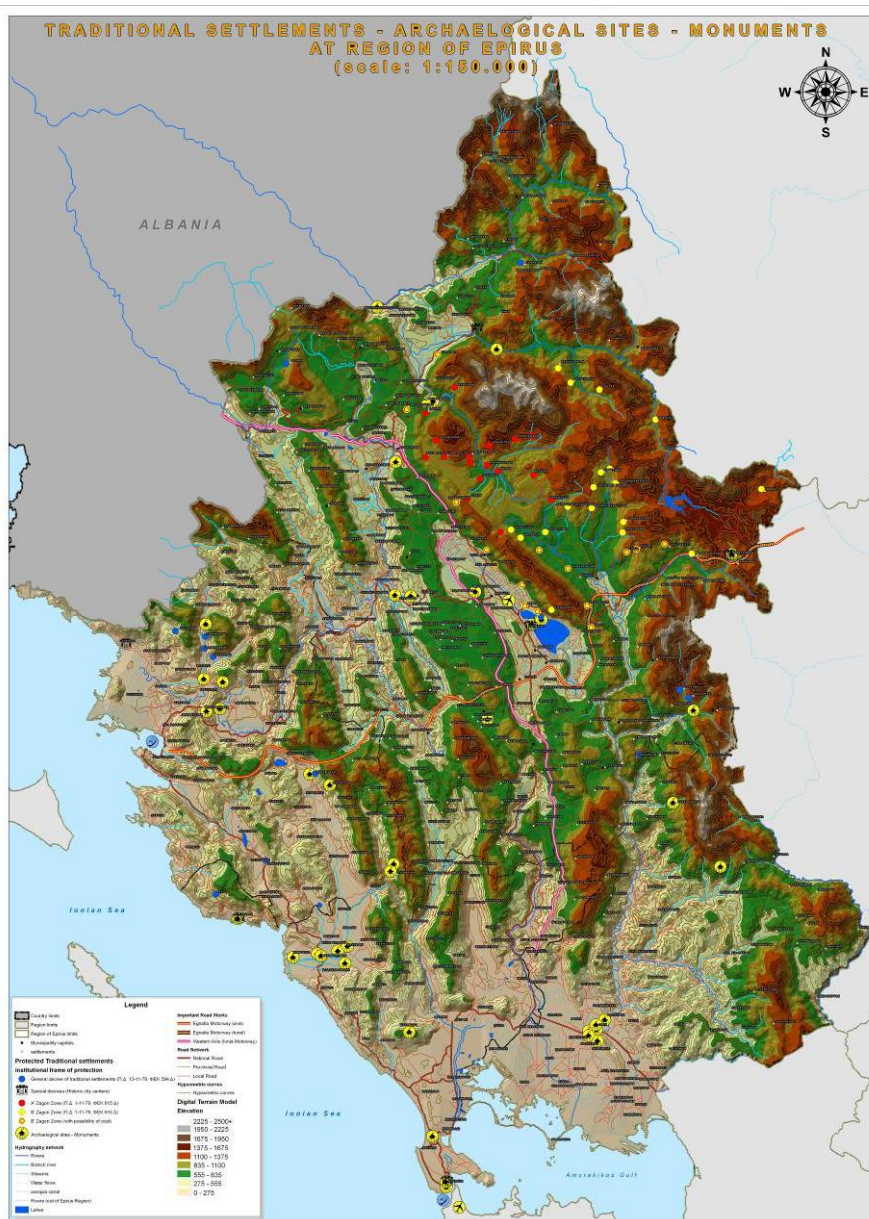
Populated for more than 60.000 years, according to discoveries of archaeologists and paleontologists, Epirus constitutes a region of contradictions. The terrain combines huge mountainous ridges which render most of the land barren and a long coastline on the west that offers direct access to the Ionian Sea, Italy and the rest of Europe. Climate presents significant differentiations between the mountainous regions and the coastal districts of low altitude: mainland climate, with cold winters, rain and snowfall in the first case, and mediterranean, mild climate, with increase humidity and hot summers in the second.

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<sup>1</sup> Census of 2001. Source: National Statistical Service of Greece (Εθνική Στατιστική Υπηρεσία της Ελλάδος)

The mountainous geomorphology of Epirus and its geographic position contributed, first of all, to the Region's long-term isolation, to its low population density (36,55 residents per kms<sup>2</sup>) and its slow development growth. Stockbreeding, agriculture and fishing were diachronically the main sectors of the local economic activity.

The tourism industry of Epirus, however, found its way to development as inversely proportional to the territorial isolation and the general low development of the region is its natural beauty combined with the cultural heritage that has been inherited from a rich in history past: periods of wellness, glory and reigns give place to those of decline, foreign domination, vigorous struggles for the independence together with a ceaseless faith to the Divine. All that past of the region has left its traces in the territory; monuments, ancient, roman, Byzantine, post-byzantine and modern, traditional settlements, countless places of devotion of great importance, all built in a territory of exceptional natural beauty.

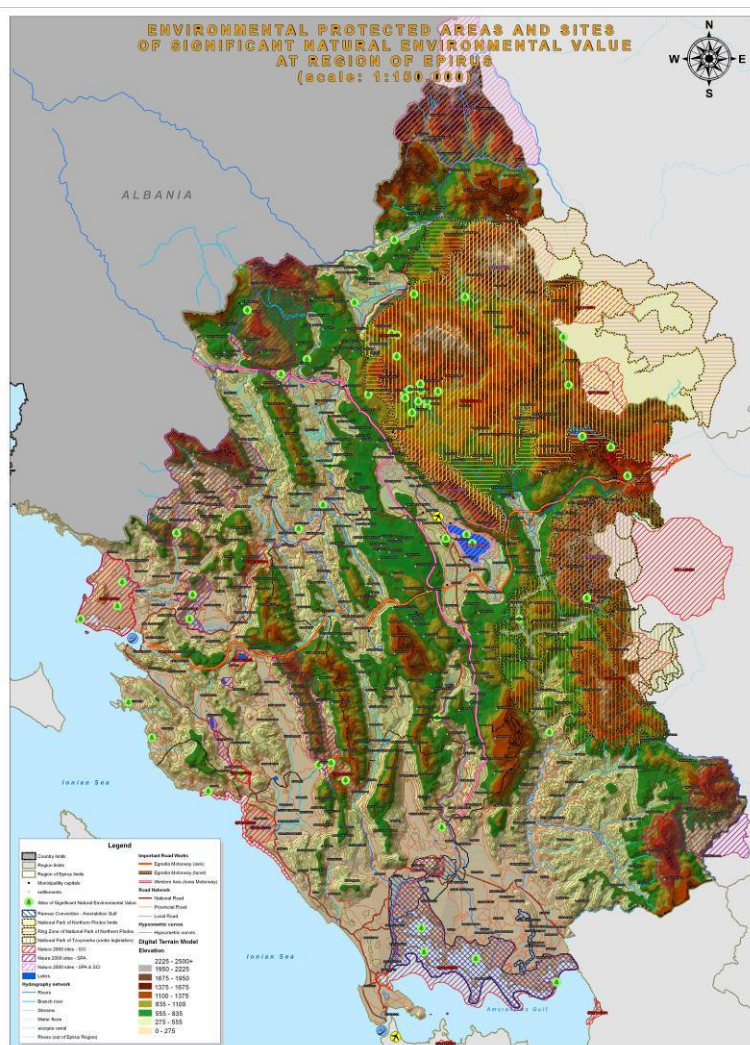


Source: Region of Epirus

During the last two decades, the accommodation structures in the Region of Epirus have been significantly improved. The statistics<sup>2</sup> show that there is an upward tendency as far as the arrivals and the accommodation in the hotels of the region is concerned. The rates of this alteration for the period September-January 2006 and September-January 2007 reach the 17% and 13,2%, respectively.

What is of great importance is the influx of a continuously increasing number of foreigners that are attracted by the wide choices concerning the type of vacations due to the geographic variety in combination with the rich cultural life.

What makes, also, a difference in the Region of Epirus is the model of tourist development<sup>3</sup> that is based, mainly, on small, often family, units providing warm hospitality and personal attention towards for every single client.



Source: Region of Epirus

<sup>2</sup> Source: National Statistical Service of Greece (Εθνική Στατιστική Υπηρεσία της Ελλάδος)

<sup>3</sup> Source: Business and Innovation Center of Epirus (ΙΑΚΕ ΗΠΕΙΡΟΥ)

## **2. The Project “Mother Language over the history” in Epirus**

Figure whose presence and role in the local history and evolution had been rather disregarded for a long time, the woman of Epirus was given the opportunity to “unwrap”, to reveal her special features and her unique identity through two studies dedicated to her.

Simultaneously, another female figure, very familiar not only within the borders of Epirus, but to innumerable people all over the world, the Virgin Mary - or Panaghiá, as the locals call Her - became the object of a separate study because of her significant and catalytic role in the life of the people of Epirus.

The above mentioned studies gave the opportunity to trace places closely related to the female presence that we considered to be worth-visiting and promote them aiming to the creation of an alternative form of approaching the region both on the level of its natural environment and of its historical, cultural, social, religious and economic context.

### **Panaghia: the Mother of the people of Epirus**

Virgin Mary was and still is the dearest figure of the church in the region of Epirus. She is a mediator, a miracle-working power, a symbol of female uplift, a comforter and a healer. But above all, for the people of Epirus, Virgin Mary is the Mother who accomplishes their desires and acts as a mediator between them and Her son, she is their greatest ally in times of war and major crises.

Her face has been painted on numerous depictions, sometimes rare or unique ones, in local or foreign styles. It is Her name that is heard the most from the lips of people, the one that is bounteously given to their children, and the one that is sung in the most of the fetes and celebrations organised by the people of Epirus in her honour.

Many places have been devoted to Her: stately monasteries, parish churches and humble chapels, built throughout Epirus, even at the most impassable and inaccessible places. This is an evidence of the measureless love and trust of people to Her face and their need to contact Her.

### **Women of Epirus and society**

“Scarred” by the tragic aspects of the region and its history, the woman of Epirus has experienced, to the greatest extent, love, pain, glory, death; she managed to survive and nurture her own world, the world of the women of Epirus.

The virtues of loyalty and love, patience and respect, the full commitment to her family and her significant social role are all traits that are attributed to the woman of Epirus from ancient times to today.

Women-symbols that were worshiped everywhere in ancient Epirus; queens and everyday women of the glorious but turbulent years of Byzantine Epirus; noblewomen and heroines of

Souli, of Zalongo, of Pindus; contemporary women from Epirus; all sharing some common features: faith, passion, lust for life, persistence in the institution of the family, perseverance, dignity.

The whole territory of Epirus, but especially its mountains, bears the memories of her presence. In the local museums her history is exposed, although in a fragmentary way. The natural and manmade environments are sealed by her figure. And the monuments that are dedicated to her constitute the acknowledgment of her endless offer.

### **Women of Epirus and economy**

Although somehow confined due to the patriarchal society of Epirus, local women are characterized by their unique ability to engage in every kind of task and constitute a considerable element of the life of family, of the community and generally the local society from ancient to present times.

Loom and distaff were inseparable companions of Epirus women from antiquity. Weaving, spinning and embroidery to cover domestic needs were their main concerns at home. As time goes by, these tasks begin to gain a bread-winning value due to the new conditions and the needs shaped by the new historic-social-political-economic status, while at the same time the women of Epirus begin to work to non-domestic tasks overtly leaving behind deep-seated prejudices. In Byzantine years, agriculture and animal husbandry become perhaps the most important non-domestic activities for women. In fact, they take part in all the tasks that ensure the survival of their families, and they even substitute the men in every activity deservedly during their absence in battlefields.

Today, women of Epirus, largely keeping the qualitative characteristics of their ancestors, follow the trends of times and they are involved in new economic activities, always using their dynamism as their primary weapon.

Scattered throughout Epirus there is a considerable number of museums where, among other exhibits, the objects of women's every-day life come to recompose this past in a very eloquent way, while their home-made products that one can find in the local market, products of exceptional quality, edible or of domestic use, become the tangible proof of their diachronic competency.