

The logo for INCULTUM features the word "INCULTUM" in a white, uppercase, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a horizontal, textured orange brushstroke that has a rough, hand-painted appearance.

Visiting the Margins.

**IN**novative **CUL**tural **ToURisM** in European peripheries

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**Pilot 8: Vjosa valley, the shared river**

**INNOVATION FACTSHEET**

**Draft 1- 2023/03**

## CONTEXT

The pilot area of the **Upper Vjosa valley** is situated in the **southeast of Albania**, close to the border region with Greece. The Vjosa River, which is considered as one of the Europe's last living wild rivers, flows from the Pindos Mountain to the southeast and drains into Adriatic Sea in the northwest. Flanking the meandering route of the river extends **a terrain of unspoiled beauty** with river terraces, hill slopes rich in Mediterranean vegetation, and high mountain massifs of forests, waters and extensive prominent pastures. The flych-formed hill slopes along the river are **home to a number of small traditional villages** and **one historical central place**, the town of Përmet that expands downwards in the lower river terraces.

The environs of the valley have **historically** sustained the **development of arable and pastoral economies**. Over the **recent years**, however, **tourism has emerged as a new and steadily expanding sector**, highly **influencing the economy of the region**.

The **landscape characteristics** of the pilot has **appealed a nature-based tourism** with outdoor activities, such as hiking, climbing, rafting, camping, horseback riding, and etc., becoming some of the most attractive touristic offers.

Along with the natural ecosystem resources, the **valley has an abundance of cultural heritage values** integrated within the revered mountainous landscape. However, **cultural heritage resources remains as yet the least explored tourist attractions** in the Vjosa valley.

Therefore, the **focus** of the pilot during the **INCULTUM** project is to **present a concept of 'inclusive tourism' and 'cross-cultural tourism'** where **tourists** is offered the option not only to enjoy the natural attractions, but also **to experience the tangible and non-tangible cultural components** of the area, **involving an active participation and interaction with local communities**.

In this context, we have identified the **cultural heritage of the Vlach minority** as the **main product of the INCULLTUM innovative actions**, aiming at **recording, revitalizing and promoting the currently menaced cultural heritage values of the Vlach people**.

**The action includes a ground-up initiative, that focuses in the following objectives:**

- Rediscover and record the cultural heritage of the Vlach minority.
- Reactivate, promote and disseminate their tangible and intangible cultural values.
- Develop a collective self- awareness and self-understanding of the Vlach heritage.

## REDISCOVER THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE VLACH MINORITY.

### Who are the Vlachs?

The Vlachs, which are known to themselves as Arāmān/Rāmān, are an ethnolinguistic group that have historically inhabited swathes of the Balkans territory. They are distinguished by their language, which is a dialect derived from Latin, and by their ways of living, based primarily on long-distance seasonal pastoral transhumance. The historical sources have recorded the presence of Vlach people in the Balkans as early as the 11th century. There is scant historical information that suggest for a systematic ethnic discrimination of Vlachs in the medieval times, which continued during the Ottoman Empire, triggered also by the nationalism and the formation of national states.

The Vlachs in Albania suffered more severely after the WWII, when the establishment of nationalist communist regime banned the transhumance movement and their culture was largely rejected.

The Upper Vjosa valley was one of the main routes used during Vlachs seasonal nomadic movements from winter pastures in the Ionian coast, towards the summer pastures in the mountain areas of south-east Albania. Very often, small groups of Vlach families built their seasonal summer encampment in the mountainous area of the Vjosa valley.

During the Medieval era, Vlach families began to permanently settle in the mountain areas to the east of the Upper Vjosa valley, ultimately losing their nomadic aspect of life, but not the language. A larger Vlach settling in the valley occurred after the 50's of the last century, and several families were permanently set in villages of the valley.



*Historic picture in of the early 20th*



*Vlachs nomadic journey early 20th*

### Identify and record the potential of tourism attractiveness of Vlach's culture.

The Vlachs have suffered a long historical **discrimination and intimidation**, which has consequently **hampered** the preservation and **appreciation** of the **symbolic aspects of their culture**, including their **past traditions, customs, rituals and material culture**. Therefore, the **first action** undertaken in INCULTUM was an **ethnographic enquiry** aiming at **recording** these **lost symbolic aspects of the Vlachs culture**.

Several **interviews** were conducted with the **elderly Vlachs**, which **enabled to record and map the historical nomadic itineraries** as well as **locate the seasonal summer and winter settlements** along the landscape of the south-east Albania.



*Interviewing the elderly Vlachs*

Other important elements of future touristic interest were also recorded, including the housing and their everyday aspect of the nomadic life.

Also, **several free-flowing encounters** were carried out with **local tourism stakeholders and policymaking institutions**, who were **introduced** with the possible **potentials of Vlach culture** for **generating new tourism products**.

## REACTIVATE, PROMOTE AND DISSEMINATE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE VLACHS.

The **reviving and presentation** of a particular **cultural heritage** aspect of a region **requires** to create an historic **interpretation** a **storytelling**, as a **mode** that **connect people** to the **legacy of their past** and **provokes the touristic curiosity** for a particular region. In the case of the **Vlachs**, we **generated a past narratives** that **evolves around the historic transhumant routes** and their **livelihood aspects**, including their **authentic dwelling**.

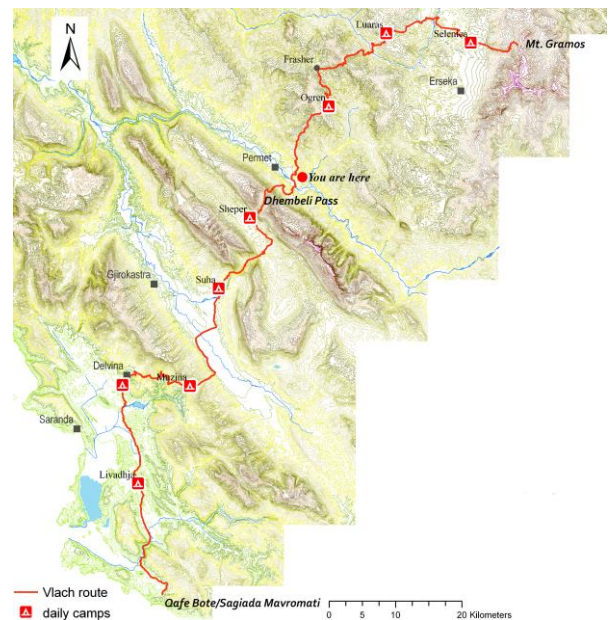
### Cultural routes that follow the historical transhumance movement

Many of the **Vlachs past nomadic movement** have **passed across** the mountainous area of the **Upper Vjosa valley**. Very often these territories were home to their seasonal summer encampment.

The **frequent meetings** and long-hours **interviews** with the elderly **Vlachs** of the valley, **allowed to create a dataset** of the **past nomadic itineraries**.

Based on these data a **hiking trial** was **designed** that follows the historical route of transhumance. The hiking **trail** was **evaluated** and GPS recorded by team members along with local young volunteers.

It starts to the west of the valley in the region of Zagoria and goes all the way to the Mt. Gramos, in the Greek boarder. This itinerary is c. 90 km, lasting up to 5 days, and it **goes along rural areas** and places of an amazing **unspoiled nature and historical beauty**, including historical villages of particular vernacular, medieval monuments, archaeological sites, and etc. These are **marginal areas** that do not traditionally benefit from tourism, hence while **contributing to the protection** of the surrounding **cultural resources**, this trial may also offer **beneficial opportunities** in the livelihood of the **local communities**.



*The new hiking itinerary of past Vlach's route*



## Reconstructing a Vlach dwelling site – the kalive

The **harsh historical trajectory** of the **Vlachs** has made it **difficult** for the **survival** and preservation of any **standing physical object** as representative of their history. In order to **materialize the surviving memory** of the Vlachs in valley and at the same time **display and validate** the physical aspects of **their past**, a **traditional dwelling** was **reconstructed** situated along the Vlachs historical nomadic route. This **dwelling** site allows to the public a **way of touching the past**, as well as offers an experience for **sharing untold stories**.

The dwelling site consists of the Vlachs **authentic nomadic dwelling** type – the *kalive*, representing a simple, circular structure built of wood and covered with thatches. It was reconstructed during July of 2022, in a camping site set just outside the town of Përmet, which is a highly frequented destination by both foreigner and domestic tourists. The **location** is **significant** as it corresponds with one of the Vlach’s **temporary daily camps** set during their seasonal transhumance movements towards summer and winter pastures. The **dwelling exemplifies** the **living history of the Vlachs** people that **survives** due to the detailed **memory retained** by those **individuals** who once lived in **pastoral transhumant** societies across the landscape of Upper Vjosa valley. It was constructed using the same techniques and materials that Vlach builders used in the past, which was acquired in the surroundings of the area.



*During the reconstruction of the kalive*



*The final view of the dwelling site*

The **construction** itself was a **sharing experience** and a **learning process** that involved elderly Vlach people, researchers, young specialists and local volunteers, allowing therefore the past masters techniques to be recorded and transferred to the new generation. It employed a **multidisciplinary approach** that combined together **culture memory, experimental archaeology** and **tourism**.

In addition, an **interpretation panel** was designed, containing a brief **storytelling of Vlachs** minority, along with a map that highlights their main transhumance route. There are QR code generators highlighted in the touristic panel, providing quick access to the online Wikimap platform that allows to navigate and download the trail.

(<https://www.wikiloc.com/hiking-trails/vlachs-transhumance-route-108659966>)

## DEVELOP A COLLECTIVE SELF- AWARENESS AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE VLACH HERITAGE

Being a deprived and stigmatized community the **Vlachs** and their cultural heritage have remained **largely unnoticeable** and unrecognized both at local and national level. Therefore, by applying a **foreground initiative**, attempts have been made towards **institutionalization of Vlachs heritage**. The effort includes, a number of **local encounters** aiming at **establishing familiarization** to this **devalued culture** and create a **local synergy** and a **sense of solidarity** among the community members.

These meetings allowed to bring together the Vlachs, other members of the community, researcher, and local stakeholder stimulating an effective discussion about the future of Vlachs culture.

Such **meetings** produced a familiar environment that resulted to be a **mutual learning process**, and while on the one hand serving to enlighten the participant with new **stories** about **Vlachs traditions**, the involvement of the **researches** on the other side, offered for the Vlachs the **opportunity to rediscover a new historical narrative** of their past that ultimately **stimulated awareness** and **self-appreciation** for their history.

Another larger assemblage took that place during late July 2022, involved a **wider participation** of local stakeholders and tourists, where Vlachs were offered the chance to **demonstrate aspects** of their **culture**, including the interpretation of folklore songs, stories and poetry in their own language. This is considered an important step that may lead towards the **institutionalization** of a Vlach's **annual celebration day** in the valley.



*Encounters with the Vlachs of the valley*