



REPORT OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL  
TRENCHES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE  
PROJECT “EMERGENCY STABILIZATION OF A  
PART OF THE NORTHERN WALLS OF THE “LEZHË  
CASTLE” ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK OF LEZHË

DEVELOPER: UNOPS – EU FOR CULTURE

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LICENCE NO. 3, A1, A2, A3-SURVEY, TRIAL TRENCHING AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL

EXCAVATIONS

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## 1. Geographical location and cultural background

### Legal bases for the drafting of this document is:

- Law nr. 27/2018 "On Cultural Heritage and Museums".
- Decision No.728, date 1.9.2010 ON THE PROCLAMATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONES "A" AND "B" OF THE CITY OF LEZHA AND THE APPROVAL OF THE ADMINISTRATION PLAN.
- On the Criteria of the Archaeological Profession approved with Decision no. 2 date 30.01. 2009 by the National Archaeological Council;
- Decision No. 367, date 21.12.2022 of the National Council for the Material Cultural Heritage;
- Decision No. 101 date 01.09. 2015 of the National Archaeological Council on the standards for the preparation of the trial trenching archaeological report.

Lezha Castle is located in Lezha Municipality, at a distance of 500 m from the city center, in its northeastern part. The castle is part of the extensive archaeological complex of the old town of Lissus. It is located at a distance of 53 km from Tirana and 34 km from the northern capital Shkodra. The structure is a masonry fortification with stone retaining walls. The masonry is from different time periods and different typologies. Lezha Castle, the earliest stages of construction date back to the 3rd century BC. The walls reach a maximum height of up to 8 m and a width of 2.5-4 m. Meanwhile, on top of the Hellenistic constructions, we have later phases, such as the Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and recently Ottoman interventions. The earliest construction phases were carried out with large dry-built stones placed in polygonal and trapezoidal patterns.



*Geographical position of the Lezha Castle.*

The later phase, different from the ancient one, is the medieval one where the constructions of the Byzantine, Venetian and recently Ottoman periods are introduced. The constructions of this period are made of well-jointed small stones and have elements such as vaults, alcoves, buttresses, cannon and gun turrets. The castle was built on the Hellenistic walls that were located in the place. The Hellenistic walls are positioned mostly in the eastern and northern areas of the castle, in the outer part. Being retaining walls, they are always subject to destruction, as a result of ground pushing. This is best observed in the northern area, where the polygonal wall has always had problems and damages, documented from time to time in restoration projects and various inspections. Lezha Castle is one of the castles with a relatively large area and the situation is a bit complex due to the large construction volume.



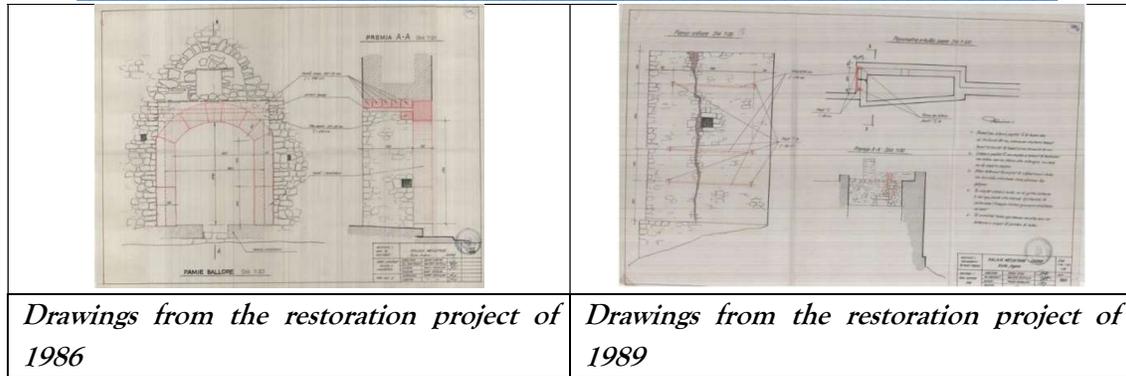
### *View of the Castle of Lezha*

From the materials provided by the archive, we noticed that Lezha Castle has undergone numerous conservation and restoration interventions over the years, which are framed with the final goal of the complete restoration and conservation of this important monument. Lezha Castle has undergone various interventions in the following time periods: During 1976, verification of the condition of the medieval wall of Lezha Castle and the protective measures to be taken: (intervention of 1976) 1. To anchor the tower with two steel anchors- buttress, to the right of the fall, which is inclined to the outer side; 2. To clean the terrain in front of the wall, breaking the latter into transportable masses; 3. To consolidate the internal constructions and the sides of the collapse between the buttress walls; 4. Attempt to pull the tower in place with the use of an argan, after cleaning it from the inside; 5. Take measures for the collapse of other walls and keep the situation under constant control.

In the year 1977: conservation and restoration intervention in the surrounding walls and intervention for the maintenance of the castle.

In year 1978: conservation and restoration intervention in the surrounding walls as well as the necessary measures to be taken for the restoration of the walls of the medieval castle and the premises inside it.

In year 1980: conservation and restoration intervention after the damages occurred by the earthquake of April 15, 1979.



Year 1982: during the year 1982, a series of restoration, consolidation and maintenance works have been carried out in Lezhë, such as in the walls surrounding the city of Lis, in the medieval castle and in the recently discovered monuments. The restoration works have focused on the ancient walls of the city and specifically on the Eastern tower, the semi-circular tower near the water tank as well as the southern part of the inner-city wall.

Year 1984: during the year 1984, a series of works have been carried out on the surrounding walls of the medieval Castle as well as on the premises inside it.

Year 1986: during the year 1986, the following conservation, restoration and cleaning works were carried out: on the surrounding walls of the ancient city; continuation of the restoration of the wall from the round tower to the south-western entrance.

Year 1989: the restoration works carried out during 1989 in the medieval fortress and surrounding walls of the ancient city of Lis are described as follows: continuation of the restoration works in the medieval fortress; a series of works have been carried out in the surrounding walls, at the entrances as well as in the premises within it; the restoration of ancient walls in different sectors have also continued.

Year 1990: during the year 1990, the following interventions were done: continuation of the works in the medieval fortress; a series of consolidating works on the surrounding walls and the cleaning of its premises.

Year 1999: in 1999 systematic works were carried out in the fort in the area around the Memorial after the removal of unauthorized constructions.

Year 2002-2003: further restoration works in the fortification walls of Lezha.

### Geographical position of the Lezha District

It lies in NW Albania, on the Adriatic coast. Area 479 km<sup>2</sup>. Population 54,200 inhabitants. There are two cities: Lezha, the center of Shengjini district and 58 villages grouped into 9 large villages. Average density; 113 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. Citizen population 18.1%, rural population 81.9%. Natural growth: 2.16%.

The relief of Lezha is partly plain, partly hilly-mountainous. Fields: in the NE, the plain of Zadriina formed by the alluvium of Drin, in the NW, the field of Kakarriq (of Torovica) located between the hills of Shengjin in the W and Kakarriq in the L, the field of Mati Bank in the S, located on the coast of right side of the mountain. These fields before WWII were swamps and were reclaimed during the years following WWII. Their alluvial soils are fertile and are now thoroughly cultivated. The mountains rise on the Eastern side of the district (Kashnjet Highlands and Lezha Highlands with the highest peak Malin e Vela: 1172 m). The main hills: the hills of Shengjin (Rrenci) and Kakarriq in the NW.

Lezha County is one of the 12 counties in Albania and has an area of 1,588 km<sup>2</sup>. The district of Lezha includes the district of Kurbin, the district of Lezha and the district of Mirdita. The District Center of Lezha is located in the city of Lezha. It is bordered to the north by Shkodra County, to the northeast by Kukës County, to the east by Dibra County, to the south by Durrës County and to the west by the Adriatic Sea. Lezha District has a population of 158,377 inhabitants.

The district of Lezha is located in the northwestern part of Albania, at longitude 41° 51' 40" in the north and 41° 35' in the south and at latitude 38° 08' in the west and 20° 10' 03" in the east and is bordered by: in the north with the Shkodër district, in the northeast with the Kukës district, in the east and southeast with the Dibër district, in the south with the Durrës district and in the west with the Adriatic Sea, with a coastline length of 38 km (from the sand thrown at Cape Rodoni).

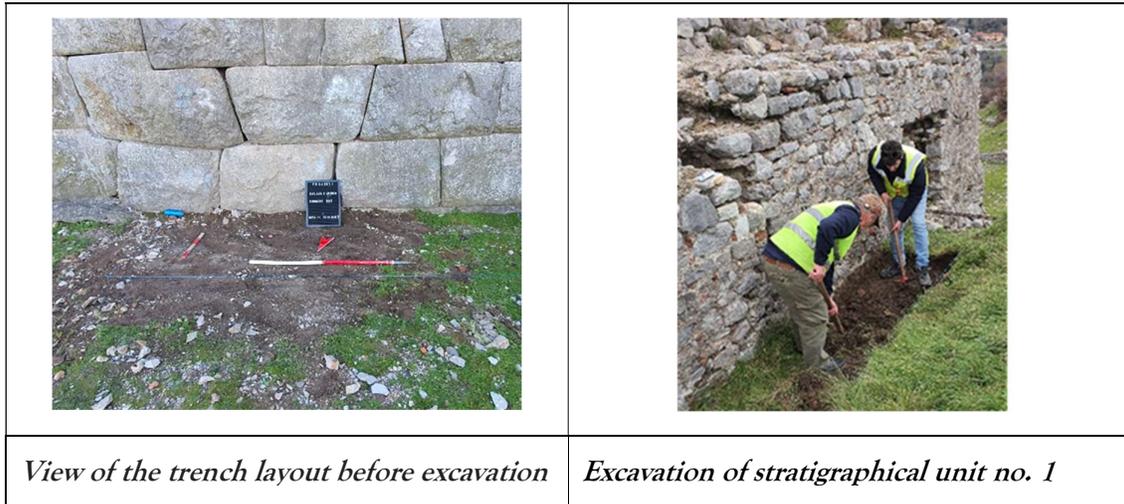


*Location of the archaeological trial trenches in relation to the city walls*

The territory of the district of Lezha has an area of 1588.4 km<sup>2</sup> and lies in the mountainous-central region and the western lowlands, where 65% of the area lies in the hilly-mountainous area and 35% in the plain area.

Lezha County has a favorable geographical position in Albania and is located at the crossroads of all transport arteries, serving as a north-south and east-west connecting node. The relief in this region presents marked contrasts of all kinds such as coastal, lowland, hilly, mountainous, alpine, etc. with an alternation between them like in no other region of the country, where the sea, fields and mountains are very close to each other.

The average height above sea level in the Lezha region is 413 m, the maximum is 2121m (the top of Kunora Mirdita) and the minimum is -4 to -6 m (Knalle, Torovicë, Kakarriq, Tresh, etc. in Lezha).



In this region, the continental climate prevails for the mountainous area and the Mediterranean climate for the plain area. The average temperature is 15 °C, while the rainfall varies from 1200-1700 mm, with irregular distribution during the year. The territory of this region is rich with great assets above and below ground, hydraulic, mining, etc.

The variety of relief, climate, topography, geology, geomorphology create favorable conditions for the living of a variety of flora and fauna, terrestrial and aquatic, wild and domesticated.

The physico-geographical elements of the territory of the Lezha district, intertwined with each other, the flora and fauna, provide stunning landscapes and beauty that mainly stimulate the development of agribusiness and tourism in this region, as two important sources of income

for increasing well-being and the prosperity of the inhabitants of this region and its development.

In the territory of the Lezha region lives a population of 212,008 inhabitants (January 31, 2007), where 40% of them live in urban areas and 60% in rural areas.

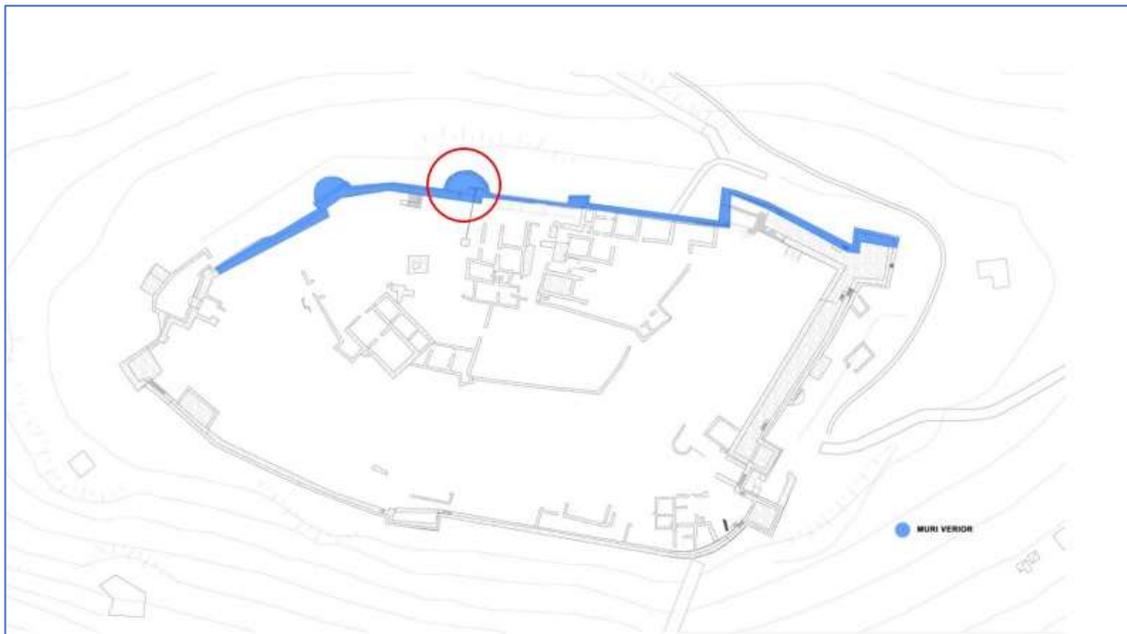
## 2. Main Project Facts

The main goal of the project's interventions is the constructive consolidation and architectural conservation of the northern surrounding wall. Through these interventions, the unique values of Lezha Castle are expected to be preserved.

After the earthquake of 26.11.2019, the castle suffered a partial collapse of the stone masonry and ancient blocks. There is also a loss of verticality of the stone wall in its northern part. Structural elements have suffered significant damage.

### The North Wall

This area presents the biggest structural problems. It is noted that in the northern wall near the circular tower with polygonal stones, there is a deep crack in the entire height of the wall and its slope. This has also led to the tilting of the tower over the circular tower. This area has always been problematic, for this reason the square tower has been reinforced with metal cables from an old intervention carried out by the staff of the Institute of Monuments.



*Plan of the North Wall*

### Methodological approach

Since the architectural object of the intervention is a Cultural Monument, in accordance with Law 27/2018 "On Cultural Heritage and Museums", the entire project follows the instructions of the Ministry of Culture aimed at securing, protecting and architectural conservation, based on adequate practice. The methodological approach adopted for the architectural and restoration project and for the various interventions of structural consolidation of the Monument, takes into account the criterion of minimal interventions, accepted both at the national level and at the international level (eg. ICROM, ICOMOS).



*Current condition of the Northern Wall*

The first phase is the identification of degradation phenomena, continuing further with the selection of the most suitable interventions for their elimination. Regarding the restoration of the surfaces, the main forms of degradation will be identified, through a survey and sketching of all forms of chemical-physical deterioration and the selection of the most suitable interventions to allow their removal without eliminating the effect of time that should continue to be clearly visible in the recovered object, this should be considered as the priority objective to then proceed with the preservation of the physical, structural and formal configuration of the monument as a prerequisite for improving its functional and relationships with the surrounding context.



*Identification of wall damages*

Since the object is located in a plain area with unstable geological formation, the most frequent forms of degradation are closely related to the problem of increasing humidity and lowering of the object. This is also noticed by the fact that part of the walls of the castle are located underground. A phenomenon that has occurred over the years as a result of the geological formation of the area where the monument is located. For this, it will be envisaged to design a drainage system as efficient as possible to remove rainwater in cases where there is flooding in the area.



*GIS map of the archaeological trial trenches in the area of the Northern Wall*

After the recent earthquake of November 26, 2019, damage or destruction of certain parts of the monument was also noticed, for which, after the diagnosis of the materials, structure and careful surveys, the preparation of restoration and reconstruction plans is underway, where necessary, mainly using original materials.



*Archaeological trench layout*



Pottery sherds from the stratigraphical unit No. 2

### 3. Location of the Trial Trenches

The project where the archaeological trial trenching was carried out in the City of Lezha, by the surrounding walls of the Castle. In accordance with the decision of the KKTKM, it was decided to lay out trenches with dimensions of 5x2 m and maximum depth up to the lowest cultural layer.

According to the field observation, based on the condition of the medieval wall in the northern part of the castle, the team of archaeologists decided to locate trial trench 1 inside the surrounding wall, with the aim of verifying the crack that the tower of the medieval wall suffered. In this case, the trench had dimensions of 5m x 2m and was excavated to a depth reaching the foundations of the wall.



*Location of trial trenches 1 and 2*

#### 4. Archaeological Trial Trenching Methodology

The archaeological excavations were carried out according to the Regulation of the Criteria for the Practice of the Profession of Archaeologist approved by the KKA dated 30.02.2009.

In accordance with the decision of the KKTKM, it was decided to excavate a trench with dimensions of 5x2 m and maximum depth up to the lowest cultural layers.

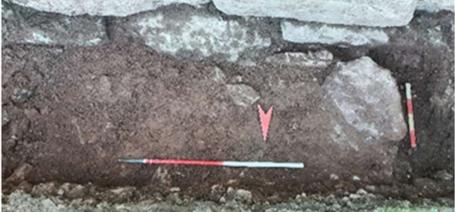
According to the field observation, based on the condition of the medieval wall in the northern part of the castle, the team of archaeologists decided to conduct a survey inside the surrounding wall, with the aim of verifying the crack that the tower of the medieval wall suffered. At this point, the trench was laid out with dimensions of 5m x 2m and excavated to the depth of the foundations of the wall.

The excavation was carried out by hand-digging of workers trained in archaeological excavation. Along with the excavation, graphic and stratigraphic documentation of each of the excavated layers was also carried out.

In order to obtain as much information as possible, judging by the archaeological findings scattered in the survey area, excavated profiles were cleaned and representative archaeological material was collected, which was documented by specialists. The cleaned profiles were documented and surveyed in order to better reflect the stratigraphy of the archaeological site. All the methodology followed for archaeological trial trenching had as its main goal the identification of archaeological material both horizontally and vertically.

The working group was led by Lorenc Bejko and was composed of archaeologists with experience in archaeological rescue excavations.

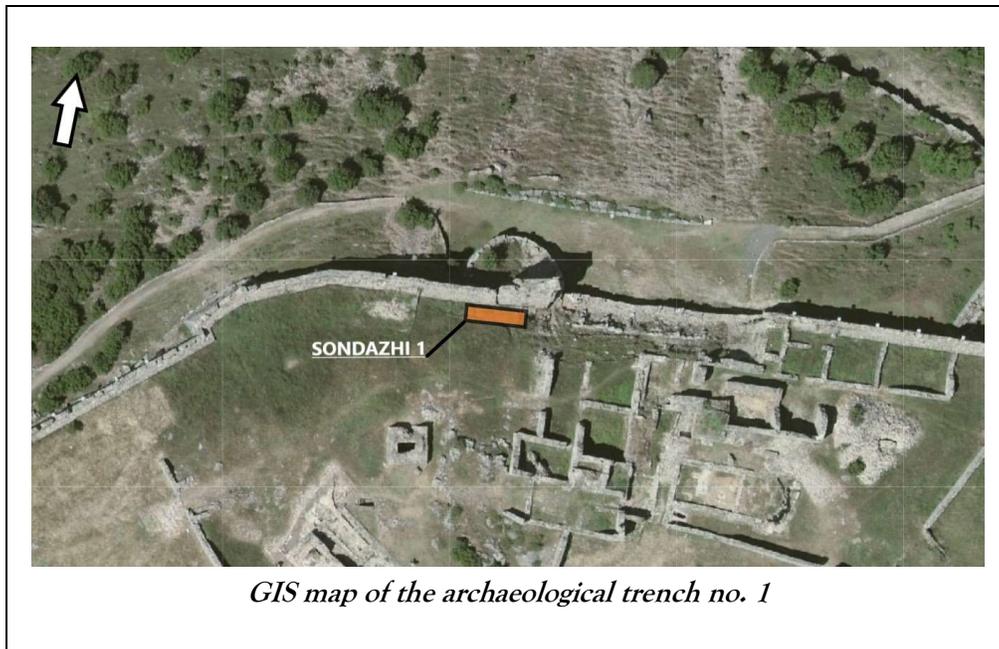
In addition to the process of hand excavation of the archaeological deposits, an integral part of the archaeological excavation was the step-by-step documentation of the situation through scale drawing: Profiles 1:20 and General Plan 1:50. The working tools used included pickaxes; shovels; hand-carts for earth transportation; trowel; brushes; draft paper A4-A3; A4 - A3 tracing paper and Total Station/GPS System.

	
<p><i>Trench layout</i></p>	<p><i>Photographic documentation of the excavated contexts</i></p>
	
<p><i>Stratigraphical documentation of the excavated profiles</i></p>	<p><i>Hand-excavation process</i></p>



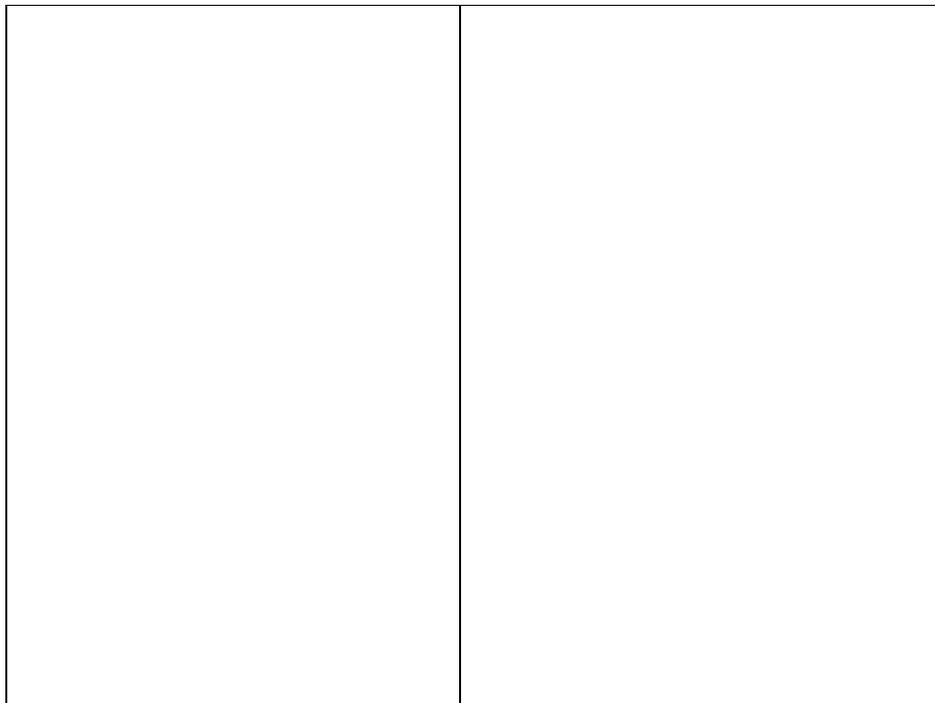
5. Archaeological contexts and finds

Trial Trench 1



The trench was defined and targeted according to the concept approved by IKTK. Trench direction: EAST-WEST, measuring 5 m x 2 m x 1 m. In this trench, excavation began normally under the supervision of archaeologists. The soil was divided into two categories: Topsoil and Subsoil. A safety distance of 1.5m from the trench profiles was also maintained. The deposits excavated from the trench were checked systematically to identify any ceramic objects or other artefact fragments. The maximum depth of this trench reached 1.1 m until the appearance of the foundations of the northern wall of the castle.

*View of the area where trench 1 was located*

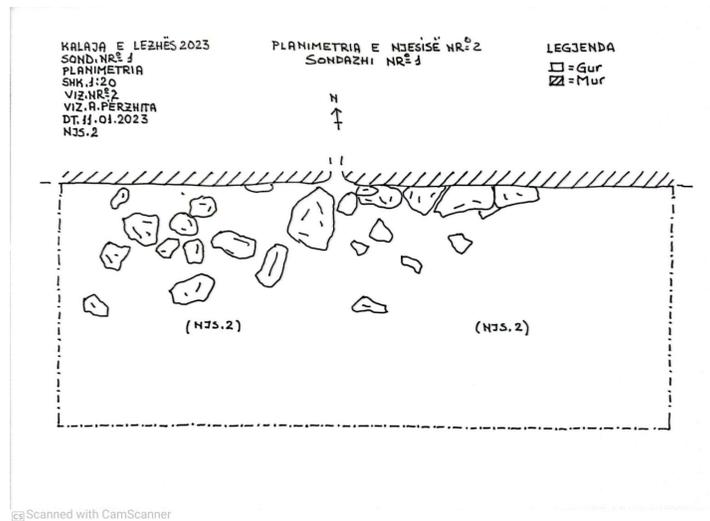




*View of the excavation process*



Excavation of stratigraphical unit 1



*Plan of Stratigraphical Unit 2 in Trench no. 1*



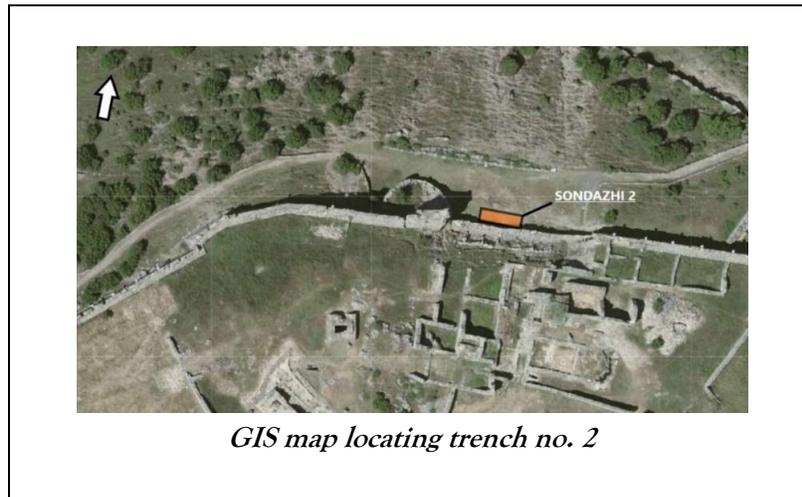
Two stratigraphical units have been identified during the excavation of this trench. They are described below:

The first unit (NJ.S 001) is a dark brown layer. This layer covers unit No. 2. Non-compact layer that extends along the entire length of the profile. Humus layer. No finds or archaeological material were found in this layer. This layer is 0.3 m thick.

The second unit (NJ.S 002) is a dark brown silty clay layer. This layer is covered by unit no.1. Non-compact layer that extends along the entire length of the profile. This unit has a thickness ranging from 0.7-0.8 m. No archaeological findings were found in this unit. It is noted that up to the foundations of this wall, the crack in the wall continues from the inner side of the wall.

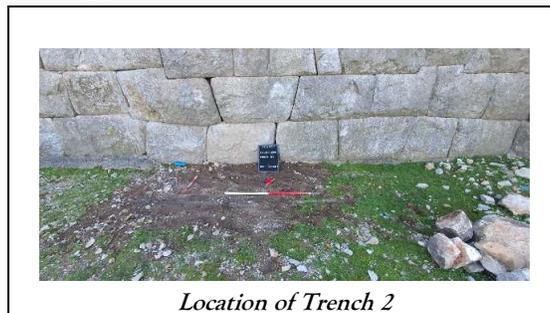
TRENCH 1		
Point	N	E
1	4626682.81	387798.12
2	4626681.45	387806.68
3	4626679.33	387807.1
4	4626680.58	387798.53

## TRENCH 2



*GIS map locating trench no. 2*

This trench was also defined and targeted according to the concept approved by IKTK. Trench direction: EAST-WEST. It was excavated measuring 5 m x 2 m x 1 m. In this trench, excavation began normally under the supervision of archaeologists. The soil was divided into two parts Topsoil and Subsoil. A safety distance of 1.5m from the trench profiles was also maintained. The soil excavated from the trench was controlled systematically to identify any ceramic objects or other artefact fragments. The maximum depth of this survey reached 1m as natural limestone formations appear.



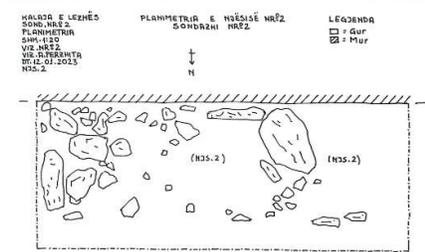
*Location of Trench 2*



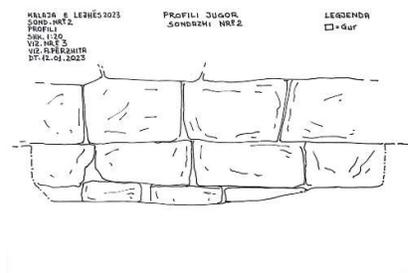
*Clearing of the trench surface*



*Excavation of layer no. 1*



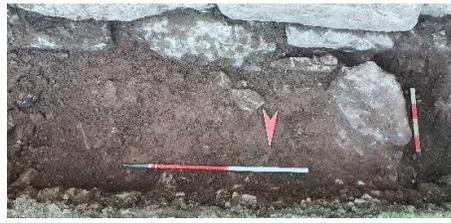
*Plan of Nj.S 2, Trench no. 2*



*Elevation of the southern profile*



*Nj.S 1*



*Nj.S 2*



*Pottery from Nj.S 2*



*Pottery from Nj.S 2*

In the composition of this trench, 2 stratigraphic units were identified, which we are describing as follows:

The first unit (NJ.S 001) is a dark brown layer. This layer covers unit No. 2. Non-compact layer that extends along the entire length of the profile. Humus layer. No finds or archaeological material were found in this layer. This layer is 0.15 m thick.

The second unit (NJ.S 002) is a layer of red color with mixed stones of different sizes. This layer is covered by unit no.1. Non-compact layer that extends along the entire length of the profile. This unit has a thickness ranging from 0.85 - 1 m. Some ceramic fragments were found in this unit.

SONDAZHI 2		
Pika	N	E
1	4626683.09	387815.4
2	4626685.2	387815.55
3	4626682.31	387822.3
4	4626682.22	387821.41

## 6. Summary of the archaeological potential of the wider area

### *The ancient city of Lissus*

The ancient city of Lezha was founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, on the foundations of an early proto-urban settlement, while it was an important economic and political center of the last rulers of the Illyrian kingdom. The earliest traces have been identified at Akropolis, which is located at the foot of Shelbum Hill. The ancient city of Lezha has an area of 20 ha, which is divided into two parts consisting of the Acropolis or the Upper City and the Lower City which stretches from the foot of the hill to the bank of the Drin River. The city of Lezha reached its peak of development during the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, and at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, when for the first time it put into circulation its own bronze coins in the name of the civic community. During this period, Lissos had become a developed craft and commercial center as well as an important seaport, which enabled the connection of the city with other ancient centers along the shores of the Mediterranean.

In the year 213 BC, the city will be occupied for a short time by Philip V of Macedonia, while in 168 BC, by the Romans (3<sup>rd</sup> Illyrian - Roman War), formally maintaining its own autonomy for a short time, while it was then included in the Roman province of Illyricum (between 27 BC - 79 BC).

During the late antique period in the 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries the city still preserved the features of an urban center. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century Lezha became part of the Byzantine theme (administrative military unit) of Durres, during which the surrounding walls were reinforced, and on top of the hill, above the walls of the Acropolis, the medieval castle was built. Also, on the walls of the lower city, another medieval castle was built, in order to protect the river pier on the then delta of the Drin River. Throughout the Middle Ages, Lezha continued to be an important economic center. Until 1398, the city was under the possession of the Dukagjini tribe, who later left it in the hands of the commercial republic of Venice<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> S. PULAHA, Vështrim mbi historinë e Lezhës, *Lissus*, Tiranë, 1962, 2. F. 83-114; F. PRENDI, K. ZHEGU, rreth zhvillimit urbanistik të Lisit (fundi i shek. IV-I p.e.s.), *Iliria*, 1, 1986, f. 57-66; K. ZHEGU, Qyteti i Lezhës dhe

### *The Skënderbeg Memorial*

The Skenderbeg Memorial is the place where on March 2, 1444 the "Lezhe Treaty" was held and where the National Hero Gjergj Kastrioti - Skenderbeg was buried on January 17, 1468. The memorial was a cult object, which was sometimes used as a church and sometimes as a mosque, in different periods. This cult object has gone through three construction phases: The first construction phase belongs to the 14<sup>th</sup> century; The second phase, when the cathedral was built, belongs to the 15<sup>th</sup> century; The third phase, when the cathedral is transformed into a mosque, belongs to the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the restoration works of the monument, the original traces of the 15<sup>th</sup> century have been considered as most important and consequently it was decided that the monument should be restored to the second phase of construction. Inside the monument, Skanderbeg's bust was placed as well as a series of objects that evoke the Hero's deeds, such as 25 bronze shields, which show his 25 main battles. A very important element is the fresco of Saint Nicholas, which is located next to the apse. According to the biography of the hero written by Marin Barleti, Skënderbeg was buried in 1468 in the cathedral church of Saint Kolli. To symbolize the Hero's grave, near the center of the church were placed copies of the monument and the sword of Skanderbeg, according to the originals that are kept in Vienna. In 1981, the full restoration of the church was completed, and in order to highlight its historical values, a colonnade was built, inside which the original parts of the cathedral dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century are protected. The transformations that the structure of the monument has undergone over the centuries have been documented in the archaeological excavations of the year 1967<sup>2</sup>.

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ishulli i Lezhës (në fund të shek. XV dhe në fillim të shek. XVI), *Vepra të mjeshtërve tanë*, Tiranë, 1983, f. 32-40; K. ZHEGU, Restaurimi i kalasë së Lezhës, *Restaurimi 1984*, 1986, f. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> L. LAZIMI, Memoriali i Skënderbeut në Lezhë, *Shtëpi-muze dhe monument kulture*, 1981, f. 118-119; L. LAZIMI, Përkujtimorja e Skënderbeut, *Monumentet*, 2, 1984, f. 57-76; L. LAZIMI, Përkujtimorja e Skënderbeut në Lezhë, *Restaurimi 1984*, Tiranë, 1986, 1, f. 12-14.



*View of the Skënderbeg memorial*

#### *The church of Saint Prenda, Balldre*

The Church of Saint Prenda in the village of Balldre, near the city of Lezha, is a single-nave basilica, covered with a pointed vault and with a semi-circular apse on the eastern side. The monument is mentioned as "the church of Saint Anne" in the account of the bishop of Tivar, Marin Bizzi, who visited the church in 1610. The interior of the church was decorated with frescoes, which represent two different periods of time and trends different aesthetics. Fragments of an apocalyptic vision in the form of Majestas Domini and figures of bishops wearing Latin priestly vestments are preserved from the first phase. From a stylistic point of view, the wall painting is characterized by the combination of the "international Gothic style" with influences from the Byzantine style of the 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.



*View of the Saint Prenda church in Balldre*

At a later period, the eastern wall of the church, with the exception of the pediment, was repainted. From the second phase there are remains of the Deisis scene, according to the traditional Byzantine iconographic form, the Mystical Supper and parts from the Annunciation. Based on stylistic criteria, the wall paintings of this phase are dated to the first half of the century. XVI and probably related to the development of the city of Lezha during the ten years of the 1530s, as a port and trading station of the Sanjak of Dukagjin<sup>3</sup>.

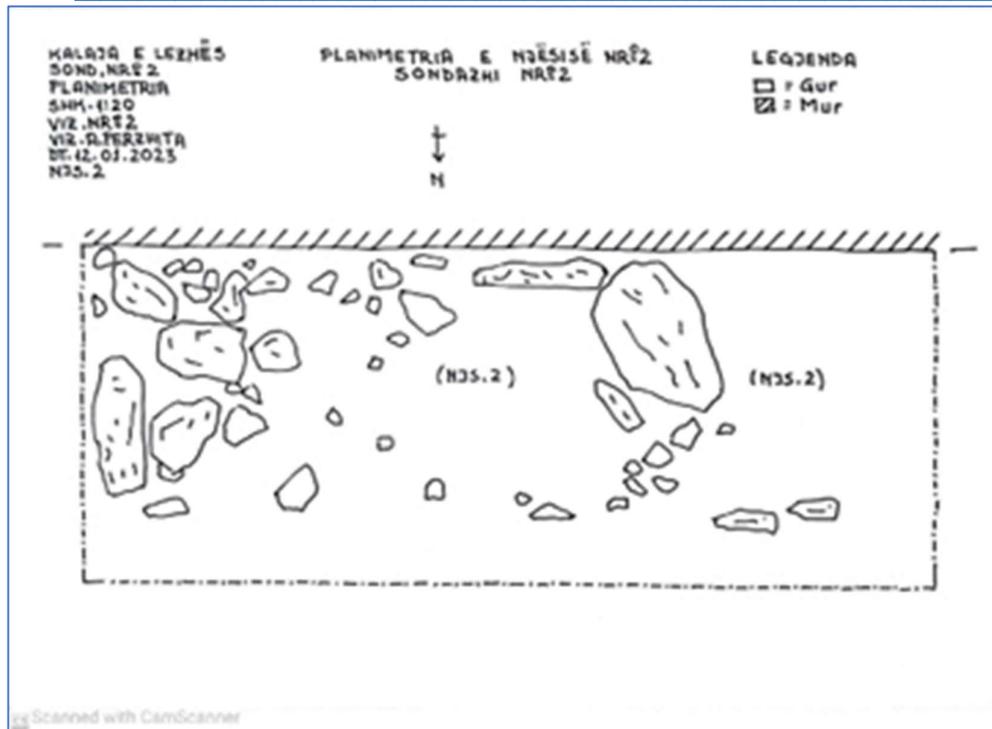
## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

- Based on the results of the archaeological surveys described above, we judge that the impact of conservation works on the archaeological potential of the archaeological park will be completely negligible and completely easily avoidable. If the need for excavating the deposits near the surrounding walls would suffice with the areas of surveys carried out, the impact would be completely avoided. In case it would be necessary to expand

<sup>3</sup> I. VITALIOTIS, Από τη βενετική Αδριατική στο μεταβυζαντινό κόσμο. Οι τοιχογραφίες του λατινικού ναού της Αγίας Παρασκευής στο Μπαλ ντρέν – Shën e Prende, Balldren – της βόρειας Αλβανίας, ΔΧΑΕ 35, 2014, f. 207-227.

the excavations, their monitoring by a monitoring archaeologist would ensure the avoidance/minimization of the possible impact, which, however, would be very limited.

- Survey 1 made it possible to document deposits that we think have accumulated near the deep fissure wall as a result of many post-depositional processes (adjustments, squares and early conservation interventions). The archaeological material there is very scarce, non-diagnostic, and re-deposited. The crack in the wall is deep (as is clearly visible on the outside) and is observed with the same width throughout the depth of the survey opening.
- Survey 2, on the other hand, yielded very few archaeological finds pre-dated to the 18th - 19th centuries AD. and in-situ deposits only in its final part. The latter was without archaeological findings, while the stratigraphic unit above (Nj.S. 01) was re-deposited and contained few ceramic fragments.
- Both surveys were refilled so as not to change anything in the static balance of the monument until the moment of the conservation intervention, and their excavation depth was marked by limiting the refilling with geotextile. In this way, the exact identification of the contours of the surveys will be very easy for the conservation team.
- The information obtained from the archaeological survey will be used in the function of designing the project of the restoration of the northern wall of the Lezha Castle.
- The report with the relevant results will be submitted for review and decision-making at the KKTKM in accordance with law no. 27/2018 "On Cultural Heritage and Museums" as well as by-laws in force.



*Plan of Nj.S 2, Trench no. 2.*





*Pottery fragments from layer no. 2.*

## 8. Bibliography

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