



The Zekate House

A Fortress in Stone



THE RESTORATION OF THE ZEKATE HOUSE

Zekate House is one of the grandest examples of the typical Gjirokastra mansions. After enjoying protected monument status for decades under the Communist regime, like many historical monuments in the city, the Zekate House fell into disrepair during the post-Communist transition. Recently the house has been restored by the Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO), an Albanian non-profit organization, working to conserve and restore the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Gjirokastra.

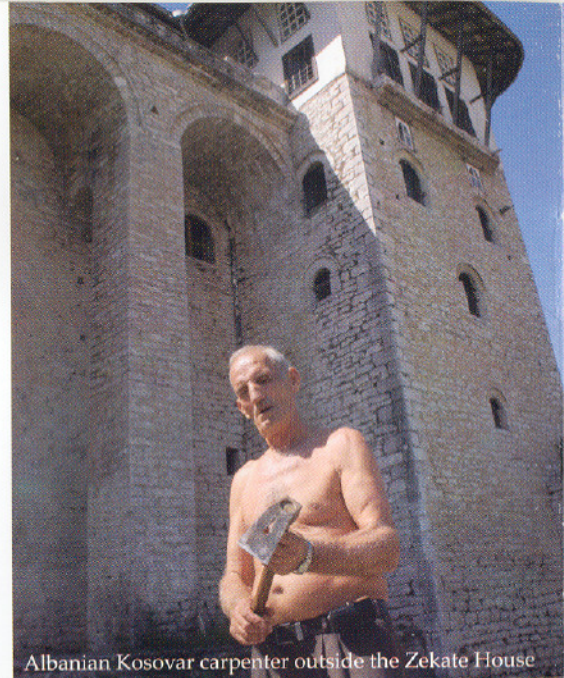
A roof builder at work



Find out how you can support the
work of the GCDO by visiting

www.gjirokastra.org

Roof tiles waiting to be hammered into place



Albanian Kosovar carpenter outside the Zekate House

GJIROKASTRA FORTIFIED TOWER HOUSES

Gjirokastra is famous for its fortified tower houses, known as *kullë* (tower). There are around 600 of these historic buildings, declared monuments of culture in the city and most were built in the 18th and 19th centuries during the Ottoman occupation. The Gjirokastra tower houses are a unique blend of Albanian and Ottoman cultures.

The fortified tower houses belonged to local landowners, administrative officials and merchants and their design reflects the status and lifestyle of their wealthy occupants. The houses have opulent interiors, large reception rooms, and are constructed high up the hillside in prominent locations where they can see and be seen in equal measure.

The houses were fortified for good reason. Disagreements between Albanian clans resulted sometimes in violent feuds and Gjirokastriot families were often involved in power struggles against each other. In addition there were a number of rebellions against the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. Notable security features were the heavy stone walls, small barred

windows on the lower floors and firearm loopholes. Apart from defensive elements, some of these features are clearly just for show. In some instances the proximity to the steep hillside behind would have made them vulnerable to attack.

At right: Characteristic defensive windows and stone walls



Winter Snow in Gjirokastra

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ZEKATE HOUSE

The history of the Zekate house owes much to the story of Ali Pasha of Tepelena, the regional Albanian ruler of the late 18th and early 19th century. Ali was immortalized in the poetry of Lord Byron and is a major figure in both Albanian and Greek histories. He even gets a walk-on part on Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Ali Pasha of Tepelena seized control of Gjirokastra in 1810 and encouraged his supporters to take up residence in the town as it was a vital strategic point between his twin capitals at Ioannina and Tepelena. Originally a regional governor appointed by the Ottoman Sultan, year by year Ali Pasha expanded his territory and governed most of what is now modern southern Albania, and modern Greece. He attempted to become independent of the Ottoman Empire, and was subsequently executed on the orders of the Sultan.

The Zekate House was built between 1811-1812, at a time when Ali Pasha was also enlarging the Gjirokastra castle. It was constructed for one of the richest citizens of the town, Beqir Zeko, an administrator in Ali Pasha's regime. Zeko shared the house with his sons, Mustafa and Feim, and their families.

The decoration and much of the design of the house is thought to be by Petro Korçari, a master architect and designer, and a favourite of Ali Pasha. According to the architectural historian, Prof. Emin Riza, the Zekate house is unparalleled in the entire Balkan region, for its size and opulence.

After 150 years of family occupation the mansion was seized by the communist state and the family moved to the

adjacent, much smaller, construction called the "odajashta" (external rooms), which was used originally for housing lesser guests and servants of the owner. Each Gjirokastra fortified tower house has a yard containing odajashta. These were often used even for cooking, but many were later converted for other uses. The Zekate house was declared a cultural monument during communist times. It has now been returned to private ownership. Recent restoration works, including the repair of the all-important roof, were funded by the Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization.



CONSTRUCTION OF THE ZEKATE HOUSE

The Zekate house exemplifies the typical fortified tower house construction - two side towers, built at varying heights to accommodate the steep gradient of the hills, connected by a central block. The construction forms two distinct parts - a stone lower storey topped by a wooden gallery of several large rooms to house an extended family. The typical Ottoman element of division according to sex into male (selamlik) and female (haremlik) quarters is not present in the Gjirokastra.

The stone walls, almost a metre thick at the base of the house, are bound with limestone mortar with an in-built band of wooden beams to give the house flexibility in the event of an earthquake. Particularly notable are the tall columned arches, a structure called *kamerie*, which have the dual function of aesthetic appeal, as well as providing the necessary support to carry the weight of the upper rooms. A distinctive feature of all Gjirokastrite houses are the stone roof slates. The slates come from the neighbouring Mali i Gjerë (Wide Mountain) hillside and are skillfully placed to create watertight roofs, using only the weight of the slates to hold them in place.

Left: Lejla Zeko, the current owner's mother, along with her cousin

Right: Photo of Zekate House right after Second World War



HOUSE LAYOUT AND FUNCTION

The Ground floor

The imposing front door leads into a lower hallway. To the right of the door is the cistern head for drawing water. The status of a house was to some degree measured by the capacity of its cistern. A house that still retained water in the autumn, after the dry summer months, was well equipped. The cistern is fed by rainwater via a system of gutters around the roof. The first rains of the autumn would wash away accumulated dirt and then a movable pipe would be placed to channel water into the cistern.

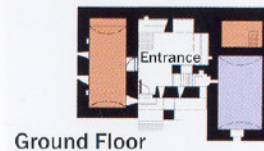
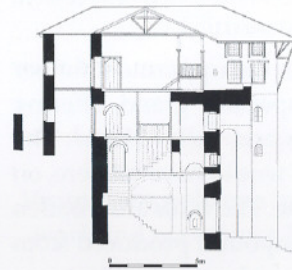
On the left is a large vaulted storeroom which would have contained milling facilities. The staircase that winds upwards through the centre of the building is paved with grey slates outlined in a red paint that protects the soluble lime cement from being washed away by frequent cleaning.

First floor

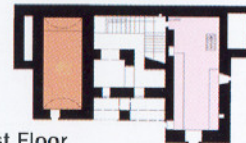
At the top of the stairs is the lower divan, or chamber, for receiving guests. This was a general purpose common room or living area with a small raised section in one corner where important persons sat. The other room in this floor was used mostly by the women of the household. Cooking facilities were located here. A wooden trap door leads to a floor storage area for food. It was kept cool by the water cistern below. While a second, smaller secret chamber was for valuables. It reputedly

- Ceremonial
- Steam bath
- Storage
- Cistern
- Living
- Domestic
- Toilet

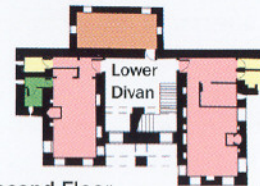
Profile View of the
Zekate House



Ground Floor



First Floor



Second Floor

also doubled as a place for hiding those fleeing the authorities.

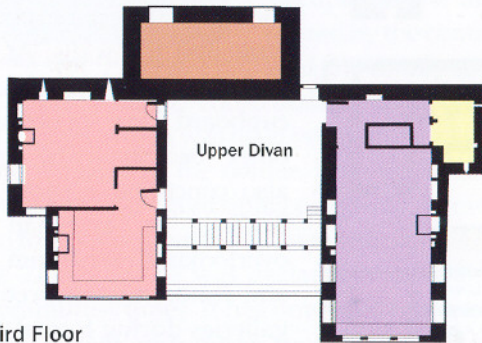
Second floor

The second floor contains two main rooms leading off from the central divan. These were intended for the two branches of the family. They are winter rooms, warmly positioned in the stone section of the tower, each containing a small toilet and one of them a *hamam* (bath) which was heated by the fireplaces in the adjacent room. Low couches ran around three sides of the rooms and storage cupboards are built into the walls. At one end is the *musandra*, a large storage cupboard for mattresses and other bedding. The *musandra* also concealed a short staircase leading to a small gallery overlooking each room. Women and children would retire to the galleries during formal occasions or business meetings when the men of the house received guests.



Third floor

The entire floor is contained within the uppermost timber gallery and this third floor divan is especially grand, offering a spectacular view out over the town and valley below. The head of the family and his chief guests would have sat here, on the raised dais, to take coffee and smoke. The walls are wooden lath covered with a special plaster compound produced from aged lime, goat hair, egg whites, fine sand, mixed with straw. The mixture dries to a flexible, fabric-like skin. The grandest reception room is located here as well as two smaller rooms. The latter were summer chambers following the model of the rooms on the floor below.



Third Floor

The Grand Reception Room

This principal room was intended to be a multipurpose reception room. Large and elaborately decorated, it was used for the most important occasions such as weddings.

The fresco (*a secco* type) of fruits and flowers is very typical of the so-called "Tulip Era" of Ottoman architecture, during the 18th century, and has symbolic meanings for the health, wealth and abundance of the household. The ceiling is finely carved, decorated and gilded again in an old-fashioned Ottoman style. Characteristic wooden elements found along the walls are also painted with floral themes. The windows, bar the lunettes with multi-coloured glass originally from Venice, are unglazed, and the large double windows provide ample light to illuminate the opulence of the room.

An elaborate gallery and *musandra* covers the entrance door and adjacent toilet.

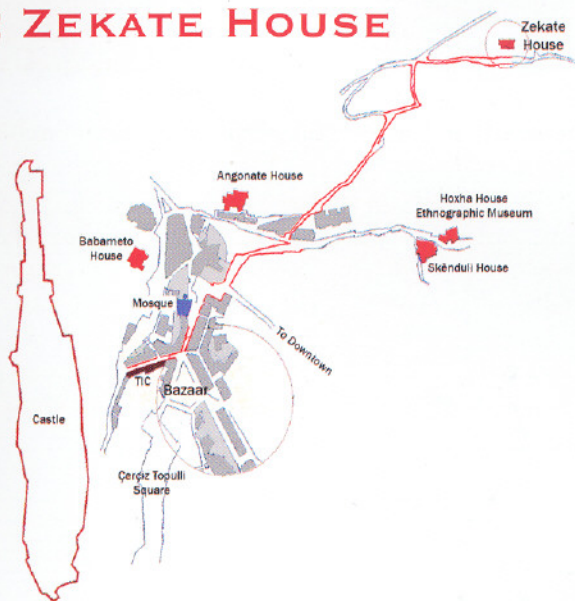
The courtyards

The house is surrounded by three stone courtyards connected by gates. Guests enter through the first courtyard alongside the *odajashta*. The second courtyard is entered through a one-wing gate and encircles the main house. The third is found on the northern end of the central yard and continues into the house's garden.

A two-story stable is located in the first courtyard. The ground floor served for the sheltering of animals, while the upper floor was used to store hay. The remains of an oven can be found in the second courtyard. This was used for baking and cooking.



VISITING THE ZEKATE HOUSE



Visitors are welcome at the Zekate House.

Guests should stop at the adjacent family home to get the keys.

The Tourist Information Center can also help organize your visit.

Telephone: 0035584269044
Email: tic@gjirokastra.org

Traditional rugs and carpets seen at the Zekate House were produced by hand at the Antigone Artisan Center (Artizanet Antigonese) located in Asim Zeneli Village 5 km outside of Gjirokastra in the Drino Valley.



Visitors are welcome to stop by and witness the artisans at work and experience local artisan handicraft production first hand.



View of Gjirokastra
from the entrance columns



Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization GCDO, Supported by Packard Humanities Institute.

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