

## The Coalescence of Albanian History: Socialist Realism, Nationalism, and the Vlorë Independence Monument

### Abstract:

November 28, 1972 saw the inauguration of one of communist Albania's largest and most significant works of public sculpture, the 17-meter tall bronze Vlorë Independence Monument. The work, created by Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami (the preeminent sculptors of the country's communist regime) represented an unparalleled attempt to visualize both the geographical and historical unity of the Albanian people, assisting in the cohesion of a modern national identity created and reinforced by the communist government. This paper considers the Vlorë Independence Monument in the context of several other contemporaneous events—the standardization of the Albanian language on the model of the southern Tosk dialect; attempts to constrain or eliminate certain religious and cultural practices of northern Albania during the Albanian Cultural Revolution; and the emergence of Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator, as a source of not merely political but also cultural authority—and shows the ways in which public monuments interacted with discourses of nationalism and history in Albania during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It examines both the visual rhetoric of the Independence Monument and the interpretations of it which were offered before it was even completed.

Nearly three years before the monument was inaugurated, a letter written by Hoxha to the three sculptors was printed in *Drita*, the official publication of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists. The letter, together with the response from the sculptors, established the crucial role that the Vlorë Independence Monument was to play in coalescing the struggles of the Albanian people (against the Ottomans, against the fascists, and against contemporary 'revisionist' socialism and capitalism), and in establishing the geographic and ethnographic markers of the Albanian 'nation' through the language of socialist realism. This paper argues that the Independence Monument, as an exemplar of Albanian communist art, represented not the propagandistic *revision* of national history—as is often claimed of socialist realism—but rather the establishment of a spatial and temporal ground from which its viewers could come to understand themselves as possessing a united national heritage and participating in the shared building of a uniquely Albanian socialism.