1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the construction of Illyrians as Iron Age archaeological culture and on the role it played within the Albanian and Yugoslav identity building processes. It explores the evolution and changes of the Illyrian concept and discourse through time, when and how they were used and how they were influenced by different trends in archaeological interpretation and historical events. By discussing the most relevant theoretical approaches to archaeology that shaped the discipline in Albania and Yugoslavia during the 19th and 20th century, this paper shows how different trends in archaeological interpretation were deeply influenced by changing geopolitical scenarios.

The idea of an archaeological culture as a definable entity in space and time has survived the onslaughts of several generations of theoretically inclined archaeologists. Cultures have been deconstructed, reformulated, renamed and simply ignored but have been refusing to be consigned to the dustbin of archaeological research, as Roberts and Vander Linden have recently recalled.\(^1\) Whether they are employed as a background to regional or local investigations or they provide the central focus for research, archaeological cultures show no signs of going away. For decades, archaeologists have classified spatial clusters of artefacts into discrete "cultures", which are conventionally treated as bound entities. As material culture was increasingly seen as an expression of group identity, archaeological cultures themselves have often been equated with past social, or even ethnic, entities. The need for reconceptualising boundaries and identity is a recurrent theme in archaeology since the late 1960s. Researchers became suspect of simple correlations between artefact distributions and group identity and sought new approaches to the interpretation of variability.

These debates and ensuing theoretical shifts have although had very limited impact on research in the Balkans. At the same time, the complex and troubled history and changing political scenarios that characterized the late 19th and 20th century continue to cast a shadow on archaeological research in this region, (re)constructions of prehistoric groups often follow the political borders established at the beginning of the 20th century or tend to reflect current political aspirations. The projection of historically contingent concepts of culture and identity into the distant past is therefore not simply a methodological shortcoming, producing agenda-driven interpretations of the archaeological record but also has caused political consequences for the present. Different types of appropriation of the past in the form of archaeological discourse based on the concept of archaeological culture reflect power struggles centred on nation and identity building.

2 The Time of Heroes Between Scientific and Popular Narratives

One of the rare overviews of Iron Age archaeology, based on the Illyrian culture concept is the book *The Illyrians*. Written by J. Wilkes, it is an attempt to present an overall synthesis of the Iron Age in the western Balkans including not only Albania, but also the whole region known in as Illyria in the past. This book belongs to a series of publications by Blackwell called *The Peoples of Europe*. The editorial project focuses on “the European tribes and peoples from their origins in prehistory to the present day”. Despite being part of a project patterned after ethnogenic concepts, Wilkes deals with the Illyrians abandoning this perspective in favour of a more inclusive and nationalism-free approach. In his work the Illyrians are dealt with as different groups, which inhabited western Balkans during Iron Age and Classical period. Illyria is then mainly used as a geographic concept, describing the roughly defined western Balkan region as seen from a Roman perspective as for the Greco-Roman historiography from the 4th century BCE, rather than an ethnic one. Aside from judging its scientific value, which is not the purpose of this paper, it is important to note that Wilkes’ book doesn’t meet the favours of the general public. Indeed, Amazon customer reviews accused his work of “suffering from Greek and Serbian propaganda” or being “influenced by anti-Albanians who have tried to erase Albania from

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