

A Journey of the Vocal Iso(n)

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By

Eno Koço

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Albanian soprano Tefta Tashko Koço (1910–1947),
who has been a mentor, an inspiration, and a guardian angel
throughout my whole life and to whom I shall be eternally grateful

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LIST OF MUSIC EXAMPLES: NOTATION AND AUDIO

Explanation of Musical Examples

As it was explained briefly at the beginning of Chapter Five (IMUS Styles) the songs have their notated and audio/recorded examples, while the liturgical chants are presented only in audio examples. Both audio versions, the multipart songs and liturgical chants, are found in the accompanying CD. The notated and recorded examples with the relevant indications are those, which were discussed in the book and broadly analysed in Chapter Five. The majority of notated examples are musical excerpts based on different Albanian publications and transcribed by Albanian scholars. The notation is given as it is published or in manuscript. Nearly all the audio examples on the accompanying CD appear only as extracts on the recordings. (Abbreviation: Not. Ex.=Notated Example, Tr.=Track). The transcription data drawn from the published sources are shown on the top left and right-hand side of the song notations.

Index of Notated and Recorded Songs in Order of the Examples

Notated Examples

<i>Not. Ex.</i>	<i>Title in Alb. & Greek</i>	<i>Title in English</i>	<i>Region & Group</i>
1	Tregon Gego Valideja	Gego Valideja's narration	Labëri, Dukat, Mixed Group
2	Nëntëmbëdhjetë janari	The Nineteenth of January	Labëri, Kuç, Men's Group
3	Këmb' o këmbë pse ...	Why my feet got so weak	Gjirokastër, Men's Group
4	Ku je rritur je bër' kaqe	Where Have You Grown ...	Gjirokastër, Men's Group
5	Pses ehorevan edhó	Last Night They Danced ...	Pogoni/Poliçan Group
6	Do këndoj po m'u ...	I'll Sing, But My Throat ...	Himarë, Men's Group
7	Lul' e bukur-o (Katina)	Beautiful Flower	Himarë, Men's Group
8	Pse m'i mban sytë ...	Why You Keep Your ...	Skrapar, Women's Group
9	Shoqe, do t'u them ...	My Girl Friends, I'll Tell ...	Korçë, Lubonjë, Wom.'s Gr.
10	Kush të nisi, të bëri ...	Who made You to ...	Gramsh, Women's Group
11	Më ra shamia në llucë	My Handkerchief Fell ...	Përmet, Women's Group
12	O qo an'e lumit	This Side of the River	Myzeqe, Fier, Gr. not known
13	Ra dielli në male	The Sun is Rising ...	Çam Men's Group
14	Alismonó ke hjérome	I Forget but Enjoy	Greek, Ktismata Group

15	Kostandini i voglith	The Little Kostandin,	Arbëresh, Women's Group
16A,B,C	Modet pentatonike	Pentatonic Modes	Types A, B, B1, 16B, 16C
17	Apekema/Apechema	“Nenano”	

Audio Examples

<i>Tr. Title in Alb., Arom. & Greek</i>	<i>Title in English</i>	<i>Region & Country</i>
1 Ç'ma ke syrin-o	Your Beautiful Eyes	Vëzhdanisht, Vlorë, Alb.
2 Thëllëzë e Gjirokastër	Dainty of Gjirokastër	Gjirokastër, Albania
3 Vajz' e bukur-o (Katina nina-)	Beautiful Girl	Himarë/N. Muko, Albania
4 Ju o malet e Skraparit	O You Mountains of ...	Skrapar, Albania
5 O po kur më shkon djalë ...	When You Walk Down ...	Përmet, Albania
6 Në ulliri	At the Olive Tree	Çam (Fier), Albania
7 Featã mutreashti napãrti di ...		
Vajza që vështron nga deti	A Lass Gazes at the Sea	Andon Poçi (Arom.), Alb.
8 Prota diminiatsã a li Anastasii		
Mëngjesi i parë i Anastasisë	The First Morning of Anas.	Kefalovriso, Greece
9 Ena savato vrãdhi		
Një e shtunë mbrëma	One Saturday Night	Parakalamos, Greece
10 Kinisa na rtho na vrãdhi		
U nisa të vij në mbrëmje	I Was About to Come...	Pogoni, Greece
11 Ti ndë një finestër e u nën një ...	You Under the Window ...	Lungro, Italy
<i>Tr. Title in Alb., Greek & Latin</i>	<i>Title in English & Ital.</i>	<i>Region/Country & Group</i>
12 Për shumë vjet, o Kryezot	God Grant Thee Many ...	Boston/Mesha Shqip, USA
13 Guri kur u vulos ...	While the stone... 1st Tone	Tiranë/Kori bizantin/Alb.
14 Asate Kyrie	1st Tone, Versetto salmico, Kinonikon	Tardo, <i>L'Antica Melur. Biz. Italy</i>
15 Nyn e dynamis	Liturgia dei Presantificati Inno Cherubico, Tono IV	Tardo, <i>L'Antica Melur. Biz. Italy</i>
16 Epi si cheri .../ In You Rejoices	Megalinaarion dell' 1 genn.	Piana Delli Albanesi, Coro dei Papàs
17 Zëri i gjashtë	6th Tone (Plag. of 2nd T.)	Papa Jani, St Demetrio Cathedral., Sicily
18 Megalínon	Megalinario	Eparchia di Lungro, Italy
19 “Protect, O Most Glorious”	Plagal of the 2nd Tone	Greek Byz. Choir, Angelop.
20 Offertoire, Terra tremult	Notus in ludes	Chan. de l'Égl. de Rome, Pérès

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PREFACE

This study is concerned with the vocal *iso(n)* repertory, used, on the one hand, in the oral traditions of the *multipart unaccompanied singing* (IMUS)¹ of the Southwest Balkans or more specifically South Albania, North Epirus in Greece and a small part of the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), and on the other hand in Byzantine chanting. The vocal *iso(n)* is an important component of these traditions, which are still practised today in the Southwest Balkan region. The study attempts to present evidence on various manifestations of the practice in their particular geographical regions and examines in detail the historical roots of these traditions.

An *ison*, a drone holding-note, comes from the Greek (ἰσον) and is the voice that provides the drone in a Byzantine chant (Eastern Christian Chant). This chant is part of the liturgical music of the Orthodox Churches, in contrast to the IMUS, which has developed as a secular repertory. In Albanian, the same word for the same function in the oral traditional IMUS is spelt *iso*. Both versions of the spelling will be used throughout this survey, *ison* in the sense of the Byzantine chanting and *iso* to refer to the South Albanian IMUS. An intermediate form of spelling with the use of brackets, *iso(n)* will also be used in order to characterise a liaison between the two linguistic forms. In both types the *iso* was never written down, but in Byzantine ecclesiastical chants the *ison* is a written neume, the earliest scored records of which can be found only from the beginning of the 19th century.

The research aims also to study the relationship, if any, between secular and religious practices, that is the *iso(n)* used in the oral traditions of the IMUS and that of the Byzantine Chanting. The former vocal *iso* repertory is broadly used in the multipart (two- and three-part) singing with *iso* of the rural and urban areas of Southwest Balkans and is profane, whereas the latter it is widely practised today in Greek Byzantine churches all over the world. The Byzantine liturgical singing of the Arbëresh Diaspora of South Italy and Sicily, which has been passed down orally from the 15th century to the present day, as well as non-liturgical singing, is also explored in this book.² The three unaccompanied forms of singing, two of which use the *ison* (the IMUS and the Byzantine chant) and the

third, the Arbëresh, which does not (with some exceptions in recent times), are analysed in separate sections of the book.

Unlike many studies of similar subject matter, which suffer from a one-sided point of view because of national bias, this book is multifaceted and even-handed. While multipart singing in Albania is usually considered to be a solely Albanian phenomenon, in Greece, it is thought of as being Greek. The Aromanians too believe that the multipart singing has generated from their tradition. In fact, the multipart singing of the Albanian and Greek, as well as Aromanian and some Slavic populations is more intrinsically bound to the region than to any ethnic group. The distinct sound of iso(n) singing echoes the internal and external historic influences of the region, interwoven with the complex modal idioms. As a result, in the regions of South Albania and northern Greece (or that of ex-Roman provinces of Epirus Vetus and Epirus Nova, created during Diocletian's reorganization), a distinct and rich local sound developed, echoing the voices and instrumental music of the East.

There are a substantial number of publications, which have treated the ison question of the Eastern chant.³ In reading several of these, I found that the authors had invested a great deal of effort studying the many aspects of this chant. Many Greek scholars, both from a liturgical as well as a musicological point of view, have researched the Byzantine ison and other modal issues related to it. Therefore, I will try to avoid as much as possible the unnecessary duplication of the findings already made by other researchers. My aim is to observe the iso(n) function as it is used in both the IMUS and Byzantine chant. The geographical range of this kind of singing, i.e. with the use of iso(n), covers an area that includes a variety of north Mediterranean cultures and others, further afield.

It would be beyond the scope of this small scale and locally specific research to aim at establishing the very source and origins of the iso(n) and to explore its ancient roots or provide evidence of its existence during that early time of the possible ison-like practices.

Although in Western references, there is no mention that the use of iso(n) is to be found before the Late Byzantine times (from about the 15th century to the advent of the Chrysanthine reform at the beginning of the 19th century), the possibility cannot be excluded that the drone was used in previous centuries. This study does not attempt to prove that the iso(n) was practised continuously from the ancient Greek period and its Esoteric music theory. It is also hard to prove that the iso was an element of ancient Southwest Balkan multipart singing since there is little evidence to support such an assumption. There are several questions to be raised but not all of them can yet be given answers.

- a) What could be the age of the iso(n) used in the Southwest Balkans?
- b) Was the ison used during Koukouzel's time (born *c*1280, died 1360–75)?
- c) To which period does the IMUS belong: the period of Antiquity, Christianity or the Middle Ages?
- d) Are the traditional multipart pentatonic songs just folk songs and dances from the Albanian-Greek Ottoman milieu or are they secular music connected with the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period?
- e) Has the IMUS been affected by Byzantine music?

Notes

¹ The term IMUS (Iso-based Unaccompanied Multipart Singing) will be used throughout.

² Arbëresh, or Italo-Albanians, are the Albanian-speaking population in parts of southern Italy and Sicily, the descendants of the 15th century refugees from the Balkans. Maintaining their native culture and language, they now populate about 50 villages in Southern Italy.

³ The Classical Byzantine and Neo-Byzantine Chants will be analysed here: the Classical Byzantine Chant is that which developed up to the 15th century and the Neo-Byzantine Chant starts from the 15th to present day.

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INTRODUCTION

They finished our entertainment by singing some songs both in Albanian and modern Greek. One man, sang or rather repeated, in loud recitative, and was joined in the burthen of the song by the whole party ... They also dwelt a considerable time on the last note (as long as their breath would last), like the musicians of a country church.

—Lord Broughton 1855

In Europe the term *ison* or *drone* is known by many names but most derive from “burdo” and “bordunus”, reflecting the terms’ origins in Medieval Latin. In France it is “bourdon”, in Italy “bordone”, “bordun” in Germany and as “burdon” in England. Sometimes it is *burden* (an archaic term for the drone) or as used by Lord Broughton, *burthen*.

The definition and development of the *ison* have been studied and tracked by various scholars, for Emsheimer; “The general concept of vocal polyphony is that of the simultaneous outflow of two or more voices of a more or less pronounced individuality... Also belonging to this category are songs with a continuous drone sounding throughout, songs in which, accordingly, there is one as it were congealed tone which has no part in the melodic unfolding; and also these are the songs that we have become accustomed to designate as *heterophonic*” (Emsheimer 1964, 43 & 46). Benjamin Kruta has written that the “voices in Albanian polyphony, including the *burdon*, form an interdependent partnership, which demonstrates an original development of this polyphony” (Kruta 1991, No. 1, 70). In another survey Kruta has written that the term *iso* “has known a massive utilisation during the last three decades. Before this period, the employment of this term was very rare since the term ‘iso’ in certain mountainous regions was not at all known” (Kruta 1991, No. 2, 45). Moody has attempted a more philosophical explanation of the use of the *ison* in Byzantine chant: “Ison ... should not be thought of as polyphony: rather, it is a splitting of the unison, a means of underlining the modality of the chant, a symbol of the eternal” (Kontakion [Moody] 1997, 7).⁴

This study is primarily concerned with the vocal *dron/iso(n)*, although it may be noted that it can also take an instrumental form. From the brief discussion above it should be clear that definitions and terminology in this area are not uniform; hence a short explanation of my choice of

terminology might be useful at this point. I prefer to use the term “multipart” for this type of drone instead of the more commonly used “polyphonic”. The latter is really not precise enough since the *iso*, being a firm tone, “has no part in the melodic unfolding” (Emsheimer 1964, 44). Martin Boiko is of a similar opinion and tries to limit the use of “polyphony” in favour of “multipart”. As well as being technically imprecise, “polyphony” also presents problems with translation. Although the term “polyphonic” is used throughout Albania and the Balkans, it should be stressed that the use of the term “polyphony” or “polyphonic” by the South Albanian and Northern Greek peoples as well as the Aromanian people, all of whom are located within a similar geographical area, is derived from a literal translation of the ancient Greek *polyphōnos* (many-voiced) and therefore connotes nothing of actual musical technique. To the average Albanian, “polyphony” or “polyphonic” would simply suggest multi-part singing; they would likely be unaware of the scholarly use of the term which refers to medieval European polyphony (independence of voice and rhythmic parallelisms). “Polyphony” and “polyphonic” used in an academic sense were introduced into the Albanian scene in the first half of the 20th century and were intended to designate a musical technique and style in which all or several of the musical parts move to some extent independently. Thus, the Western term for “polyphony” and the Albanian or Greek “polyphony”, as it is still used today, are not comparable with one-another for musical-theoretical reasons.

The IMUS is not an isolated phenomenon. It has survived in many local musical traditions of the north Mediterranean as well as in pan-European traditional music and beyond, in forms as various as Scottish bagpipe tunes, Sardinian multipart singing, Latvian folksongs of the old variety—the *dainas*, Georgian folk polyphony and Indian music. Multipart singing styles, with or without a drone, have been preserved in the oral traditions of the Balkans; including Bulgaria, the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; and also in Western Europe, in Italy (Sicily, Sardinia), France (Corsica) and Portugal. However, the *iso* as used in various styles of multipart unaccompanied singing in Southwest Balkan rural and urban societies is identified by its own musical grammar and melodic formulae. It can be differentiated, for example, from the three-part singing of the Corsican *paghjella*, the Sardinian *tenore* or Mid-Western Bulgarian multipart singing. The Balkan Peninsula, particularly the area where Albania is now situated, has long attracted researches and travellers who have noted and written about the local traditional music, and the impressions from those observations have been of various kinds; James Dallaway makes clear in his reflections; “the

dronish chant, unassisted by instrumental music, has high antiquity ... for the dullest ears would be disgusted by such a grating monotony” (Dallaway 1797, 414).

As a participatory and unifying element the ison is an important component of Byzantine ecclesiastical music. The congregations and practitioners of Orthodox religious ceremonies would be unlikely to acknowledge any relationship between their repertoire and that of traditional IMUS communities (IMUS communities who in turn would likely be just as unwilling to acknowledge a shared heritage). Nevertheless, we may suggest some similarities in traces of microtonic intervals, modal character, free rhythms, improvised ornamentations, intoning process, as well as a thoroughly vocal repertoire posed to an oral transmission process, and—above all—the iso(n), all of which are found in both traditions. Further work is required to sufficiently identify any relationship between these two very different traditions but nevertheless there seems to be scope for further study in this area.

Curt Sachs in his chapter “Western Orient” discusses the drone features in the musical systems of the ancient world explains:

Droning is indeed the basic form of counterpoint wherever double pipes are played. The Arabian *arğül* and the double oboes of India, the Sardinian triple clarinet *launeddas*, and practically all bagpipes in the world provide one pipe for the melody and the other for the sustained pedal tone below the melody. Drones, archaic in themselves, were doubtless known at least five thousand years ago. On one relief of the Egyptian Old Kingdom a double clarinet is depicted, and Sumer has left double oboes of the same time; on some pictures of the Egyptian New Kingdom (after 1500 BC) the piper fingers the right cane with both hands while the left cane is merely supported by the thumb, which clearly indicates that the left cane sounds a drone (Sachs 1943, 98 & 99).

Questions concerning the use of the iso in secular and pre-liturgical repertoires, as well as in Byzantine chant, have drawn the attention of several scholars who over the years have introduced the idea of possible iso(n) marks in Southwest Balkan native musical traditions. Doris Stockmann, for instance, in her *Zur Vokalmusik der südalbanischen Çamen*, writes: “[Kenneth] Levy drew attention to the parallel use of the *ison* drone in Greek liturgical music and suggested the possibility of persistent traces of Byzantine liturgical practice in Albania ... Rajeczky asked whether it was quite certain that the *ison* came from Byzantine Church music. Precisely the opposite might have occurred. Hoerburger noted that the *ison* singers were to be met with in the Greek part of Southern Epirus, but only among refugees from the Albanian area” (D.

Stockmann 1963, 44). Levy himself provides a more thorough examination of the Byzantine ison:

To Western ears, the most striking Byzantine performing practice is the use of an Ison or drone to accompany liturgical singing. This is still heard in Orthodox churches. The earliest creditable evidence for the practice goes back to perhaps 1400. It was well established in the mid-15th century and was described in 1584 by the German traveller Martin Crusius:⁵ “more utriculariorum nostrorum, alius vocem codem sono tenet, alius, *Dra Dra*, saltatorium in modum canit”. There are indications that Ison singing (or perhaps simple parallel polyphony) extends back farther than the 15th century, but there is no independent Byzantine polyphony of the kind that developed in the west (Levy 1980, 561).

The use of the ison and other components in Byzantine chant has attracted Greek and non-Greek scholars and several have attempted to identify the Byzantine ison as far back as the 13th or 14th Centuries during Koukouzel’s time.⁶ Conversely, Dimitri Conomos, has stated that “the introduction of the drone, or Ison singing, so familiar in contemporary Greek, Arabic, Romanian and Bulgarian practice, is not documented before the 16th century, when modal obscurity, resulting from complex and ambiguous chromatic alterations which appeared probably after the assimilation of the Ottoman and other Eastern musical traditions, required the application of the tonic, or home-note, to mark the underlying tonal course of the melody” (Conomos 1982, 1). Tillyard also identifies a later origin in his *Twenty Canons from the Trinity Hirmologium*; “no directions or the tempo or manner of singing have come down to us from the Middle Ages. ... The drone or the holding-note, often heard at the present day, is not mentioned until the sixteenth century and may be a late importation from the East. This also applies to the nasal singing which displeased many travellers in Greece in the nineteenth century” (Tillyard 1952, 6).⁷

A German-Albanian expedition was carried out in 1957 by Erich Stockmann (group leader), Wilfred Fiedler (linguist), Johannes Kyritz (technician), Ramadan Sokoli (ethnomusicologist) and Albert Papparisto (musicologist) in three different places in Albania (Fier, Babicë and Skelë, near Vlorë) where the Chams (Albanian Çam)⁸ were spread out and settled after the Second World War. After the expedition a meticulous study of this very type of Cham singing was made by Erich and Doris Stockmann.

Albanian scholars, such as Kostandin Trako (1919–1986), Ramadan Sokoli (1920–2008), Benjamin Kruta (1940–1994), Kosta Loli (1948–), Spiro Shituni (1951–), Sokol Shupo (1954–), Vasil Tole (1963–) and Ardian Ahmedaja (1965–), have all contributed to the study of the

multipart songs and singing. In articles on Albanian traditional music, Trako, a scholar of the Academy of Religious Music in Bucharest, has dealt with the role and function of the iso(n) in this music by describing it as a “pedal”. “The tonalities of the Korçare music”, according to Trako, “are always shaped, based on and made to revolve around Byzantine and Gregorian Medieval scales with most of them involving pentatonic scales” (Trako 1943, 2–3). Examining the different types of diaphonic instruments such as *cula-diare*, *bishnica* and *gajde* (folk instruments with two pipes, one for the tune and the other for the drone/iso), which are played in the manner of multipart songs, Sokoli has pointed out that this kind of “pedal was an earlier practice than the ison used in the *Papadike* and *Heirmological* practice of Byzantine liturgical songs” (Sokoli 1965, 135). Ahmedaja has stated that “traces of these [drone] features can be noticed in the Arbëresh songs” (2001, 269). Shupo has indicated three main possible ways the iso was introduced into Albanian unaccompanied multipart song: first, as a continuation from ancient Greek culture; second, as a derivation from Byzantine music which itself was also based on the ancient patterns; and third (the most complex and debatable), as a result of Arabic musical influence on South West Europe. There is also a fourth approach, (although less credible according to Shupo) which associates the iso’s origin with the period of the Ottoman occupation.⁹

Kruta’s work on the iso question, in particular, benefits greatly from his regular field research expeditions to South Albania and his meticulous observations. He has explored the possible existence of the iso in Southern Italy, among the Arbëresh people, who followed both the traditional and Byzantine music of Albania and Morea.¹⁰ Kruta has categorically dismissed the suggestion of some non-Albanian scholars that the iso/drone has evolved alongside the multipart unaccompanied singing through the Byzantine liturgy, and states that “the drone does not come from Byzantium”. He argues that “the traditional music of other Balkan nations, such as Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania and particularly Greece, although having had an influence from the Byzantine or Bogomil liturgy, there is no evidence that this music has known the bourdon ... Thus, if the iso had penetrated into South Albanian traditional song from the Byzantine chant, it would have also diffused to the central Albanian regions, and, certainly, to the other traditional songs of the Balkan peoples” (Kruta 1991, 69). There is certainly a logic to Kruta’s argument but I feel there is still room for discussion on this issue.

Notes

⁴ Ivan Moody in “Kontakion: Mysteries of Byzantine Chant”, Audio CD, 1997, Label: Philips, ASIN: B000001340

⁵ Martin Crusius (1526–1607). His “*Turcograeciae libri octo*” published in 1584, in Basel, mentions reports of having heard the drone sound.

⁶ Jan Koukouzel, a distinguished composer of the 14th century became famous in the imperial court of Constantinople for his remarkable voice, a gift which made him a favourite of the Byzantine emperor and won him the sobriquet *angelophonos* (“angel-voice”). ... Koukouzel appears as an innovator at the beginning of the 14th century, perhaps the first to abandon an older, more conservative manner of composing for new melodic invention.

⁷ “Twenty Canons from the Trinity Hirmologium”, transcribed by H. J. W. Tillyard, in *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae*, American Series No. 2, vol. 4, Boston, Paris, London, Copenhagen 1952.

⁸ In this paper the versions Çam, Çamëri will be used in an Albanian context, and Cham, Chameria, in non-Albanian.

⁹ Personal communication, April 2004.

¹⁰ *Morea* is a term applied only to the Peloponnesus but in colloquial Albanian it is often extended to include the whole of southern Greece.

PART I:
SYNTHESIS

CHAPTER ONE

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF EX-ROMAN EPIRI, *VETUS AND NOVA*

Before it saw significant changes in the first decades of the 20th century the region covered by South Albania and North West Greece was largely pastoral, inhabited by a population whose lives were tied inexorably to the land. In this it was not too far removed from southern mainland Greece, although it retained its own distinctive geographical and rural features. However, one major difference marked this area out; it had not become a part of the Greek state until 1912, almost a hundred years after the Greek revolution, at the very same time that Albania won its independence.

The Southwest Balkan region that practises the ison-based multipart unaccompanied singing (IMUS) and the specific anhemitonic pentatonic system is now shared between the modern states of Albania, Greece and a small part of the Southwestern Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). In the course of this research the term “Epirus” will be used only for historical reasons and in strictly geographical and cultural contexts, i.e. as a geographical concept and not an ethnic connotation. “Epirus” is the Greek word for “mainland” and the ancient term “Epirus”, where the concentration and most elaborated area of the IMUS and anhemitonic pentatonic systems are practised, is used here to refer mainly to the region that was earlier called the Roman province of *Epirus Vetus* (Old Epirus), regardless of modern political boundaries. In the same way, the term “Epirus” also refers sometimes to the late Roman province *Epirus Nova* (New Epirus), which encompasses the northern part of the *Epirus Vetus*. It is necessary to clarify that the terms “Epirus” or sometimes Epiri (the latter encompassing both *Vetus* and *Nova*) describe better the region where the IMUS was and is practised, instead of frequent delineation to South Albania and northern Greece. Today’s Albania partly occupies the ancient provinces of New Epirus and Old Epirus. In the last hundred years or so and especially since the Second World War the term “Epirus”, or more specifically “Northern Epirus” (as the Greeks call a part of southern Albania)¹, is used not in the sense of a solely geographical term, but as an

ideological and political term of great density, which has, from time to time, carried the emphasis of an irredentist content.

Northwestern Greece (Epirus) and the Southwestern Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) were once closely linked and the route from Janina to Florina, Manastir (Bitola) and Salonika (Thessaloniki) passed through the city of Korçë. The historical region of Epirus Vetus is generally regarded as having extended from the Akrokeraunian mountains (to the south of the Bay of Aulon/Vlora) in Albania, to the mouth of the Acheloos river (Gulf of Arta or the Ambracian Gulf) in Greece. Its eastern boundary was defined by the Pindus Mountains that form the spine of mainland Greece and once separated Epirus Vetus from Macedonia and Thessaly. The river Vjosa (the ancient Aoos) defined the northern border line of Epirus Vetus. The Vjosa continued into what was once the bordering province of Epirus Nova. Extending north up to the Mati river, and stretching east around the region of Lake Ohrid. Epirus Nova contained several cities of great importance including Dyrrhachium and Apollonia. To their west the Epiri (Epirus Vetus and Nova) overlooked the Adriatic and Ionian Seas; although the Island of Corfu, located just off the coast, is not generally regarded as being part of the southern province. This Province was dominated by a large Illyrian population but nevertheless contained a strong Roman presence. In South Illyria there were settlements of mixed Romanic indigenous tribes who spoke a Romanin or Romance language and were known later as Aromanian/Vlachs.

The Greeks call the Epirus region Thesprotia while the Albanians call it Çamëri (Chameria). Until the mid-16th century, the population of this region was almost entirely Christian and during the entire 18th century Muslims were still a minority among the Albanian population. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that Muslim Çams (Chams) began to surpass the Orthodox Chams in numbers. A compact group of Albanian-speaking populations, Muslim and Christian, lived in the Greek Thesprotia/Chameria until 1944 at which time the Muslim Çams were forcibly moved from west Epirus and re-settled in sundry groups along the Albanian coast between Sarandë and Durrës. Budina and Hart have suggested that the Muslim Çams in Epirus “maintained a separate presence until their exodus during the 1920s and during and after WWII. Unlike the Arvanitas (this is the name given to Albanians living in Greece), who settled as independent small farmers and stockbreeders in Greece, the Chams had composed land-owning class” (Budina & Hart 1995, 54–62).

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My aim here is to focus on the musical borders of the Southwest Balkans where the drone-based singing and the anhemitonic pentatonic system of music have been practised over the centuries. However, as will become clear, musical borders cannot always be so easily separated from political boundaries. The geo-political landscape of the Southwest Balkans, including in this study parts of Albania and the Epirus region, has changed dramatically over the centuries. It is a history of a series of radical political changes that saw old empires fall and new empires rise to rule in their place. With them they brought new ideas, new peoples and new cultures. The region saw much suffering and warfare but it also played host to a remarkable meeting of cultures; invaders often became settlers, bringing with them new styles of music. Over time these gradually became intermingled with existing techniques to produce the rich musical history of the region which is in part the subject of this book. To understand this heritage we must, therefore, turn to the politics and history of the region, a brief overview of which will inform and enrich our understanding of its musical heritage.

The ancient Greek historian Strabo tells of fourteen independent tribes who lived in this area over a time period roughly stretching from 1270 to 168 BC; ruled by a long line of kings they formed the main part of the Kingdom of Molossia. The most prominent of these kings was Pyrrhus of Epirus (318–272) who began his life at the court of the Illyrian king Glaukias. Plutarch, the 1st and 2nd century (AD) historian, writes that after a battle with the Macedonians “Pyrrhus, returning gloriously home, enjoyed his fame and reputation, and was called “Eagle” by the Epirots. “By you”, said he, “I am an eagle; for how should I not be such, while I have your arms as wings to sustain me?”

Thucydides, the 5th century (BC) historian, classified the Epirote tribes, the Thesprotians, Molossians and Chaonians, as “barbarians” who spoke a language that was non-Greek. It seems likely that there was an ethnic and linguistic mixture in Epirus, some tribes speaking Illyrian, some Greek or Thracian, others both languages (Strabo calls them in Greek “diglottoi”).² Hammond writes that “the archaeological evidence shows that Greek culture, as revealed in pottery and other objects, did not penetrate into inland Epirus, except at Dodona and there only to a very limited extent, until the fourth century. The historical evidence in general and Thucydides’ description of the tribes of inland Epirus as *barbaroi* are in agreement with the archaeological evidence” (Hammond 423, 1967).

In 168 BC the Illyrian/Epirotic lands became a Roman province and a Roman military road, the famous Via Egnatia (Egnatian Road) was constructed in the late 140s BC. It stretched from the cities of Epidamnus

and Apollonia (“an exceedingly well-governed city” according to Strabo) on the Adriatic Coast, across the new provinces of Macedonia and Thrace, to the Black Sea, thereby linking Rome with its eastern colonies. In 396 AD the Roman Empire split into two; the Western half was now ruled from Rome and the Eastern half, which contained the lands which now make up Albania and Greek Epirus, came under Constantinople’s control. Diocletian reorganised these eastern lands into the provinces of Epirus Vetus, with its main centre at Nicopolis, and Epirus Nova, whose political-hubs were Dyrrhachium (Durrës) and Apollonia. It is to this area in the period of Roman rule that many of today’s Aromanian/Vlach peoples can trace their ancestors, their Latinised provincial heritage has been preserved in their distinct customs and Vulgar Latin-based language. They are still concentrated in considerable numbers around the Pindus Mountains and in Albania, North Epirus, Western Thessaly and FYROM.

For both the Illyrians and the Greeks Epirus had been a marginal land. By first half of the 20th century many scholars believed that Thracian, Illyrian and possibly ancient Macedonian were, if not one language, then at least very closely related. There have been attempts to prove that the similarities between Thracian and Illyrian match with the present day Albanian and Romanian. Hamp asserts “most Albanian-Rumanian correspondences come from borrowings by Vulgar Latin (as precursor of Rumanian) in Dardania from an Illyrian substrate” (Hamp 3, 1963).

By the turn of the 11th century the Roman Church had reached a point of crisis; differences in language, culture and religion, and disagreements over papal authority and important canonical issues were pulling the two sides of the empire apart. In 1054 the Great Schism saw the once sister churches of Rome and Constantinople split away from each other. This struggle had a direct impact on the Southwest Balkans, Albania and Epirus. Most Albanians living in the mountainous north became Roman Catholic, while in the southern and central regions, the majority became Orthodox. In the north Latin was the dominant written language whereas in the south Greek predominated. Such splits were not uncommon in an empire with a rich ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity.

The Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–565) had a substantial impact on this area. It was Justinian who first codified Roman law and built the most famous Byzantine church, Sancta (Hagia) Sophia, in Constantinople, one of the supreme monuments of all Christian architecture. Justinian’s father, Sabatius, was of Dardanian/Illyrian origin and Justinian saw his mission within a Latin tradition. Despite the turbulence of the 6th century, Justinian’s reign witnessed the construction of some remarkable churches and forts in the Southwest Balkan Peninsula and around Byllis (present