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## The Aaos Valley: context and historical background of the area



Aaos Valley belongs to Konitsa's municipality, a mountainous municipality consisting of 47 villages spread in an area of 951.18 km<sup>2</sup>, with a population of 6,362: one of the most sparsely populated areas in Greece. Konitsa is the main town of the area and the capital of the municipality surrounded by some of the highest mountains of Greece. It is built on the edge of Vikos Canyon, core of the National Park of Vikos-Aaos and one of the four Greek Geoparks, which became a member of the European and Global Geopark Networks in 2010. Numerous geosites within the territory are situated in landscapes of incomparable beauty.

The history of the area goes back to the Palaeolithic era, when the caves of the landscape gave shelter to the first inhabitants and the river easy access to food. Since then, as the archaeological data suggest, the area was constantly inhabited. Lengthwise Aaos River in Greece and Albania was passing the historic road, which was connecting ancient Macedonia with the harbour of Vlore and the Adriatic Sea. The road still follows the same route, but it remains in a bad condition, isolating both sides of the borders, Konitsa and Permet. During the Empires era both sides of Aaos Valley were one geographical, social, economic space. Especially during the Ottomans Empire, in Ali Pasha's era, the whole area was favoured, flourished, and obtained many privileges and became a centre of trade. Dipalitsa's Bazaar was famous and became a development tool for the area, driving up the agricultural production and the processing activities, especially of fur and leather and increasing the population, according to historical data. The last century of the Ottomans was a recession period; many people emigrated to Vlachia, Egypt, Istanbul and other places. Some of them made big fortunes and funded numerous projects, schools, churches, community infrastructures like stone bridges, paved roads and irrigation canals. The remittances of the immigrants raised the standard of living even in the recession period.

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**Contact person:** Antonella Fresa,  
Network Coordinator: [fresa@promoter.it](mailto:fresa@promoter.it)

**Pilot Coordinator:** The High Mountains cooperative

**Pilot's webpage:**  
<https://incultum.eu/pilots/7-aaos-the-shared-river/>

### **Project participants:**

University of Granada, Spain  
(Coordinator)

Matej Bel University, Slovakia

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Promoter S.r.l., Italy  
(Network Coordinator)

SDU – University of Southern Denmark,  
Denmark

University of Pisa, Italy

Uppsala University, Sweden

G.A.L. Elimos, Italy

Eachtra Archaeological Projects, Ireland

Bibracte, France

The High Mountains cooperative, Greece

Centre for the Research and Promotion  
of Historical-Archaeological Albanian  
Landscapes, Albania

University of Algarve, Portugal

Provincial Tourism Board of Granada,  
Spain

Municipality of Permet, Albania

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The 20th century comes with the rise of national states and after its liberation from the Ottomans, Konitsa becomes an isolated place to the borders of the new Greek state, rather than a centre of a broader area that it was before. Immigration and remittances continue and the only thing that stopped the population drainage was the relocation of the refugees from Asia Minor in Konitsa. The refugees brought with them new cultural elements and new ways of cultivation and reform of the local agricultural production. The greatest wound for the area was the decade of 40s. The Greek-Italian war, the German occupation and the civil war, all have their epicentre in Konitsa. The first wins against the Italian army took place here. In Aetomilitsa village, was the headquarters of the Democratic Army of Greece. In the village, until today, there is the military hospital and all the abandoned military infrastructures. The caves in the mountains around are full of military equipment. The last act of the Greek civil war also played here, with the first testing of the Napalm bomb.

**The stone building culture**, developed by the people of Mastorochoria, a complex of 13 small mountainous stonebuilt villages, was built collaboratively by their people, close to river Sarantaporos. The villages' entity was named out of their people's profession. "Mastoras" in Greek is the Craftsman and "Choria" means Villages, so Mastorochoria are the villages of the craftsmen. To overcome the recession of the last Ottoman period the people of these villages developed a unique system of technical specialization. Every village was educating its people in a specific job related to building and constructions and then they were forming groups of craftsmen of different specializations capable to complete every construction project. These groups were called Bouloukia. After their villages, they built various public and private buildings, churches, bridges, watermills, irrigation canals, terraces, etc, all around the region and the country, but they also worked in many countries abroad, like the US. They even developed their own secret professional language called koudaritika.

**Transhumance culture and the Vlachs:** the basic characteristic of Vlachs is the semi-nomadic life that dictates a special way of life and identifies the characteristics of their society and economy. It is a way of life regulated by the ecological conditions that sealed the collective life of these people. Until the beginning of the 20th century, only the Vlachs of Aetomilitsa had about 40,000 sheep and goats, from which they produced milk and wool products. There are six Vlach villages in Konitsa and until today there are people speaking the Vlach language, which is only oral and is something between Latin, Romanian and Greek. There are Vlachs on both sides of the borders in Greece and Albania, but for them there is no border, they use the same routes to graze their sheep before the borders even existed. Another interesting element about them is that in some villages they never developed individual land ownership; the land was and is a common asset. Moreover, they developed a system for distribution and use of pastures. The annual redistribution of pasture use is done by a general "gathering" of the livestock farmers, in accordance with unwritten rules and in a ceremonial manner. The final decision is taken unanimously and is respected by everyone.

**Water culture:** water is the dominant element of the area, it shapes the way of life of the inhabitants, their culture and activities. In every village, there are traditional community infrastructures to make good use of the water. Everywhere there is at least one watermill, water saw, community washing machines working with the power of water. Traditional irrigation systems and canals were made by the locals many years ago to irrigate not only the gardens of the houses, but also every slope and field of the area. Most of these infrastructures are abandoned now but they can be renovated and used again giving a good example of sustainable living. itineraries, such as hiking trails and guided tours, which will be made available to different targets, on the occasion of the above mentioned activities carried out on site.

Image: The old bridge of Konitsa – By Onnozweers, CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.