

# *The Diaspora as a Bridge between the Vatican and Albania: The Role of the Arbëresh Colleges in Preserving Albanian National and Religious Identity (17th–19th Centuries)* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this article is to examine the role of the Arbëresh diaspora as an institutional and cultural bridge between the Vatican and Albanian society from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It explores how the Arbëresh religious colleges established in southern Italy functioned not merely as centers of theological education, but as structured mechanisms for preserving Albanian national and religious identity during the period of Ottoman rule, when cultural and educational institutions in the homeland were severely constrained. The study adopts a historical-institutional and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on church history, diaspora studies, and Albanian national historiography. It analyzes ecclesiastical reports submitted to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, early Albanian-language publications produced within Arbëresh colleges, and biographical material related to clergy and intellectuals educated in these institutions, alongside established secondary scholarship. These sources are interpreted through the analytical lenses of diaspora mediation, institutionalized identity preservation, and religious cultural diplomacy. The analysis demonstrates that the Arbëresh colleges operated as identity-producing institutions that closely interconnected religious formation with linguistic*

*preservation, historical consciousness, and early forms of national ideology. Through these colleges, the Arbëresh diaspora generated a transnational elite that acted as a stable intermediary between the Vatican and Albanian society, transforming religious education into a vehicle of cultural diplomacy and laying the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Albanian National Awakening. By conceptualizing the Arbëresh diaspora as an organized institutional mediator rather than a symbolic or purely cultural community, this article offers an original contribution to broader debates on diaspora-led nation-building and the role of religious institutions in the formation of modern national identities, while situating the Albanian case within a wider European and comparative perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Arbëresh diaspora; Vatican; Albanian identity; religious colleges; nationalism*

## **Introduction**

The history of Albania during the Ottoman period was marked by complex political, cultural, and religious tensions, in which processes of social transformation were often caught in a dynamic interplay between resistance and assimilation. Islam, gradually introduced through individual conversions and imperial policies, profoundly altered the structures of Albanian religious and institutional life. This transformation, accompanied by restrictions on the use of the Albanian language in liturgy and public education, as well as obstacles to the development of independent cultural institutions, placed national cohesion and the continuity of cultural heritage at risk. In this challenging context, the Albanian diaspora assumed an irreplaceable role, becoming a vital source for the preservation and cultivation of ethnocultural and linguistic identity.

Within this historical mosaic, the Arbëresh community occupies a special place. Following the mass migrations of the fifteenth century, they settled in southern Italy, Calabria, Sicily, Molise, and other regions. The Arbëresh preserved their language, customs, and historical memory while integrating into Italian society, without severing their spiritual and symbolic ties to their homeland. This dual position, simultaneous integration in Italy and maintenance of a living connection with Albania, made them natural intermediaries between the Holy See and the Albanian people, serving as channels of communication, knowledge dissemination, and spiritual reinforcement.

With their commitment, and under the direct support of the Vatican, a network of religious and educational institutions was established to form new generations of Albanian intellectual and clerical elites. The Arbëresh colleges, founded and supported by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Congregatio

de Propaganda Fide), were conceived as part of a long-term strategy to cultivate leaders capable of confronting the many challenges posed by the Ottoman reality. These institutions were not merely didactic or theological centers; they functioned as genuine laboratories of identity, where religion, culture, and nationhood were woven together into an organic unity.

Liturgy, philosophy, classical languages, and Albanian were integrated into their curricula, shaping an elite prepared not only for religious service but also for the broader mission of safeguarding and affirming the Albanian nation. In these academic spaces, the Albanian language acquired a special status as both a liturgical and educational language, contributing to its standardization and transforming it into a key instrument of national awareness. Through the translation of liturgical texts, the compilation of grammars, and the publication of early works in Albanian, these colleges endowed the language with a dual function, spiritual and identitarian.

This article aims to provide a detailed analysis of the role of these institutions, presenting them as pivotal nodes of cultural resistance and as powerful bridges between the Vatican and Albania. Special attention will be given to the cases of Palermo, Cesena, and Loreto, three centers which, despite differing characteristics and orientations, collectively represent common models of intertwining religious mission with national aspirations. Their study reveals that the Arbëresh colleges were not temporary institutions, but rather foundational pillars in the process of Albanian nation-building and in preparing the ground for the National Awakening (Rilindja Kombëtare).

This article addresses the following research question: How did the Arbëresh religious colleges function as institutional bridges between the Vatican and Albania, and in what ways did they contribute to the preservation and transformation of Albanian national and religious identity prior to the nineteenth-century National Awakening? By focusing on these institutions as organized mechanisms of mediation rather than as symbolic cultural spaces, the study seeks to clarify the specific historical role of the diaspora in Albanian nation-building processes.

While the article does not aim to provide an exhaustive political history of Albanian, Vatican relations, it focuses instead on the institutional and cultural mechanisms through which the Arbëresh colleges mediated identity, knowledge, and national consciousness across borders.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical-institutional methodology aimed at analyzing the role of diaspora-based religious institutions in processes of identity preservation and nation-building. Rather than presenting a purely

descriptive historical narrative, the research conceptualizes the Arbëresh colleges as institutional actors operating within a transnational religious, cultural, and political framework linking the Vatican and Albanian society from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The methodological approach combines elements of church history, diaspora studies, and the historiography of nationalism. Particular attention is paid to the institutional functions of the colleges, education, publication, clerical formation, and mediation, through which religious structures intersected with cultural and national dynamics. This allows the study to move beyond individual biographies and to assess the colleges as durable mechanisms of identity production and transmission.

The primary sources examined include ecclesiastical reports addressed to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, early Albanian-language publications produced or disseminated within Arbëresh colleges, and documented biographical material related to clergy, poets, and intellectuals educated in these institutions. These sources are analyzed through historical source criticism, with systematic attention to authorship, institutional affiliation, purpose of composition, and intended audience. This approach makes it possible to distinguish between normative ecclesiastical discourse and concrete practices of linguistic, cultural, and educational preservation.

In addition, the study makes use of comparative reading across institutional cases, Palermo, Cesena, Loreto, and San Demetrio Corone, in order to identify recurring patterns as well as functional differences among the colleges. This internal comparison enables the identification of common institutional strategies, while also accounting for variations in geographical location, historical context, and institutional mission.

Secondary sources consist of both classic and contemporary scholarship on Albanian nationalism, Arbëresh studies, diaspora theory, and religion-nation relations. These works provide the broader interpretive framework within which the empirical material is situated and allow the Albanian case to be contextualized within wider European and Balkan processes of nation-building.

The analysis is guided by three key analytical concepts. Diaspora mediation refers to the role of the Arbëresh as intermediaries between the Vatican and Albanian society, facilitating flows of education, ideas, and cultural legitimacy. Institutionalized identity preservation denotes the embedding of language, historical memory, and cultural norms within stable religious and educational structures. Religious cultural diplomacy captures the use of religious institutions and discourse to project an image of Albanian identity aligned with European and Christian traditions. These concepts structure the interpretation of the sources and guide the assessment of how the Arbëresh colleges contributed to the formation of Albanian national consciousness prior to the emergence of a modern Albanian state.

The selection of the colleges of Palermo, Cesena, Loreto, and San Demetrio Corone is justified by their historical continuity, documented archival presence, and sustained role in clerical, linguistic, and cultural formation across different periods. Together, they represent complementary institutional models through which the Arbëresh diaspora articulated its mediating role between the Vatican and Albanian society.

## The Arbëresh Diaspora and Its Connection with the Holy See

The formation of the Arbëresh diaspora after the fifteenth century was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of the larger waves of migration that affected the populations of the Balkans following the advance of the Ottoman Empire and its expansion into Albanian territories<sup>1</sup>. Following the defeat of the organized resistance led by Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, thousands of Albanians were forced to seek refuge across the Adriatic. They settled primarily in Calabria, Sicily, Molise, and Apulia, where they founded new villages and communities, organizing them with well-structured religious, social, and juridical institutions. These new settlements were not reduced to mere refugee colonies; rather, they became stable centers of a renewed identity, in which the experience of exile was transformed into a source for strengthening ethnic consciousness.

What distinguished the Arbëresh communities from other migrant groups was the fact that they neither dispersed nor fully assimilated into Italian society. Instead, they constructed a dual culture, in which Arbëresh identity coexisted and interacted with the Italian political and social environment<sup>2</sup>. This cultural duality was reflected in the use of the Albanian language in everyday life and in liturgy, alongside the use of Italian in administration and public communication; likewise, in the preservation of Albanian rites and customs within the structures of local Italian society. This dual experience not only ensured the survival of Arbëresh identity but also created bridges between East and West, between the Byzantine heritage and the Latin context.

The process of preserving identity unfolded through a wide spectrum of cultural and spiritual practices: the institutions of the Byzantine rite, liturgy in the native language, polyphonic songs, epic poetry, and a rich oral tradition. These elements were not mere folklore, but powerful instruments for transmitting historical memory and for shaping a collective culture resistant to assimilation. Many scholars have described the Arbëresh diaspora as a 'living archive' of medieval Albanian culture, since certain elements of folklore that diminished or

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1 Frashëri, Kristo. 2011. *Historia e shqiptarëve*. Tiranë: Toena

2 Bartl, Peter. 2001. *Albanien: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet.

disappeared in the Albanian territories, due to Ottoman pressure and restrictions on cultural expression, survived and were preserved precisely in the Arbëresh colonies<sup>3</sup>. These elements included not only ancient literary and musical traditions, but also symbols and rites that connected younger generations with the memory of a lost homeland. In this way, the Arbëresh were not merely passive custodians of collective memory, but also active agents of a long-term cultural project, centered on the survival and renewal of Albanian identity. This tradition became the foundation for the cultural and political revival of Albanians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the Arbëresh, inspired by the heritage preserved in the diaspora, played a crucial role in shaping Albanian national consciousness and in advancing the processes of the National Awakening (Rilindja Kombëtare)<sup>4</sup>. As such, they may be regarded not only as custodians of heritage, but also as early architects of the Albanian national project.

## Relations with the Holy See

Unlike many other Christian populations of the Balkans, which often remained isolated from European ecclesiastical centers and were therefore more easily exposed to the pressures of assimilation, the Arbëresh enjoyed a direct and lasting connection with the Holy See. The Vatican perceived them as a spiritual bulwark against the advance of Islam and as a strategic instrument for maintaining Catholic influence in the geopolitically sensitive region of the Balkans<sup>5</sup>. This vision of the Holy See was not limited to a religious dimension, but also carried a distinctly political emphasis, as support for the Arbëresh was viewed as a means of exercising influence in Albanian territories without entering into direct confrontation with the Ottoman Porte. For this very reason, from the establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622, the Arbëresh diaspora became an integral part of the Vatican's long-term plans for the region. This new ecclesiastical institution, created with the aim of spreading and consolidating the Catholic faith in territories where it was under threat, regarded the Arbëresh as a reliable ally and a secure channel for communication and influence in the Balkans<sup>6</sup>. Their inclusion in this project transformed the Arbëresh diaspora into a significant actor, not only in the preservation of religious identity, but also in its intertwining with the cultural and national dimension of Albanian identity. The Holy See invested heavily in the formation of Arbëresh elites through the establishment and support of religious colleges. Arbëresh students received

<sup>3</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2007. *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>4</sup> Jorga, Nicolae. 1919. *Histoire des états balkaniques*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.

<sup>5</sup> Skendi, Stavro. 1967. *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878–1912*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Logoreci, Anton. 1977. *The Albanians: Europe's Forgotten Survivors*. London: Victor Gollancz.

scholarships, theological and philosophical literature, as well as an educational program specifically tailored to the needs of the ‘Albanian mission’<sup>7</sup>. In these colleges, they were trained not only as clergy with profound spiritual formation, but also as teachers, writers, and translators, capable of working in the field and disseminating their knowledge. Thus, the Arbëresh graduates of these institutions became dual agents: on the one hand, carriers of Western culture and thought, and on the other, defenders of the Albanian language, customs, and national identity<sup>8</sup>.

This special relationship between the Vatican and the Arbëresh was not confined to the religious sphere. It also possessed a political and cultural depth that rendered the partnership even more enduring. The Holy See employed the Arbëresh diaspora as a direct channel of communication with the Albanian population, exerting influence not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the development of Albanian culture and language<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, the Arbëresh themselves regarded this support as a means of strengthening their identity, preserving their language, rite, and customs, while keeping alive their spiritual and cultural bond with the homeland of origin. This interaction created a reciprocal partnership: the Vatican secured a reliable instrument for maintaining its influence in the Balkans, while the Arbëresh benefited from steady support in preserving their national consciousness.

## The Diaspora as an Actor of Cultural Diplomacy

One of the most intriguing dimensions of the Arbëresh role in Albanian history is the fact that they can be regarded as early actors of cultural diplomacy. Through their educational, literary, and ecclesiastical activity, they contributed to the construction of an image of the Albanians as a Christian people, closely connected to Europe and capable of preserving their identity in the face of Ottoman rule<sup>10</sup>. This image was not merely a reflection of internal self-awareness, but rather a deliberate strategy aimed at generating sympathy and support within Western circles. It was consistently cultivated in the Vatican colleges and disseminated through the networks of Arbëresh missionaries active in Albania and abroad. This activity would have a significant impact in the centuries that followed, particularly during the diplomatic efforts for the international recognition of Albania at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>11</sup>.

In this way, the Arbëresh heritage can be seen as a form of cultural capital employed to position the Albanian nation within the political and cultural map of

<sup>7</sup> Gawrych, George. 2006. *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913*. London: I.B. Tauris

<sup>8</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>9</sup> Elsie, Robert. 2005. *Albanian Literature: A Short History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>10</sup> Buda, Aleks. 1985. *Probleme të Rilindjes Kombëtare Shqiptare*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave

<sup>11</sup> Puto, Arben. 2009. *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit dhe ideologjia kombëtare shqiptare*. Tiranë: Dituria.

Europe. The contribution of the Arbëresh diaspora was not limited to renowned figures of literature and national thought such as Zef Skiroi, Jeronim De Rada, and Giuseppe Schirò, who gave a high literary and intellectual dimension to their mission. Alongside them stood an entire generation of lesser-known clerics and intellectuals who returned to Albania to open schools, preach in the Albanian language, and build bridges of communication between the local population and Western centers. These local actors demonstrate that the Arbëresh diaspora was not a community locked in nostalgia for the homeland, but an active mechanism for the transmission of cultural and ideological values. Through their efforts, not only Catholic faith, but also the ideas of European humanism and Enlightenment were conveyed to Albania, nourishing the process of national consciousness and preparing the ground for the National Awakening<sup>12</sup>.

This makes the Arbëresh diaspora a unique factor in Albanian history: a small community in numbers, yet one with a disproportionate influence on the preservation, development, and internationalization of Albanian national identity. Operating in an intermediary space between the Vatican, Italy, and the Albanian territories, they emerged as a mediating elite that articulated a conscious project of nation-building. This project was not an isolated one, but received continuous and structured support from the Holy See, which regarded the Arbëresh as a reliable partner for maintaining its influence and for affirming the Albanians as part of the European Christian family (Clayer, 2012).

The following sections present the main analytical findings of the study. Rather than treating the Arbëresh colleges merely as historical case descriptions, they are examined as institutional mechanisms through which religious education, linguistic preservation, and national consciousness were interconnected. Each case illustrates a distinct but complementary dimension of the diaspora's mediating role between the Vatican and Albanian society.

## **The Arbëresh Colleges as Centers of Knowledge and Identity**

The College of Palermo, founded in 1734, represented one of the most important centers of educational, spiritual, and cultural formation for the Arbëresh and Albanian elite of the time. At a moment when Albanians in their native territories faced severe cultural and religious restrictions under Ottoman rule, this college provided a space in which the Albanian language, customs, and heritage could be freely preserved and developed. For the Arbëresh settled in southern Italy, it served as a point of identity reference, while for Albanians arriving from the occupied territories, Palermo became an open gateway to the Western world and a place where they could acquire contemporary education and European culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Kola, Paulin. 2003. *The Search for Greater Albania*. London: Hurst & Company.

A clear example of the impact of this institution is the figure of Giuseppe Schirò (1865–1927), who was educated in Palermo and later became Archbishop of Durrës. Schirò distinguished himself not only as a senior cleric of the Catholic Church but also as a defender of Albanian education and the dissemination of national literature. He published writings and preached in the native language at a time when the use of Albanian was restricted, giving it a new spiritual and cultural dimension. Through his work, the Albanian language was elevated not only as a tool of daily communication but also as a medium of ecclesiastical and cultural expression, affirming it as part of the European tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Another prominent figure associated with this college is Zef Skiroi (1865–1927), a distinguished Arbëresh poet and scholar. Thanks to his academic and cultural formation in Palermo, Skiroi developed an extensive literary and scholarly activity, in which poetry and studies on the Albanian language became powerful instruments for the affirmation of Albanian culture. His works were published in prestigious Italian and Albanian journals, giving international resonance to Arbëresh and Albanian culture<sup>14</sup>. Through his writings, Skiroi managed to intertwine poetic aesthetics with national engagement, becoming a key figure in the process of the Albanian National Awakening.

Thanks to these figures, the College of Palermo is revealed not merely as a school of religious education, but as a strategic center for the formation of intellectuals capable of building lasting bridges between the Vatican, Italy, and Albania. It created an elite which, through writing, preaching, and cultural activity, articulated the idea of an Albania closely connected with the Western world and capable of preserving its identity in the face of historical challenges.

In analytical terms, the College of Palermo exemplifies how religious education functioned as an institutional platform for linguistic preservation and elite formation, transforming ecclesiastical training into a mechanism of national mediation between the Vatican and Albanian society.

## The College of Cesena

The College of Cesena, founded in 1710, was smaller in scale and less renowned compared to that of Palermo, but it had a clear mission: to train clergy and missionaries prepared to serve in Albania and in other territories of the Balkans. Unlike other colleges that functioned as cultural and academic centers, Cesena had a more practical and missionary profile, focusing its efforts on preparing clergy for direct action in the field.

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<sup>13</sup> Bartl, Peter. 2001. *Albanien: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet.

<sup>14</sup> Elsie, Robert. 2005. *Albanian Literature: A Short History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

An emblematic figure of the model that this college sought to produce, although not formed directly in Cesena, was Pjetër Bogdani (1625–1689). Through his monumental work *Cuneus Prophetarum*, Bogdani demonstrated how a cleric educated in the West could serve not only as a theologian and missionary, but also as a defender of the Albanian language and national identity<sup>15</sup>. This was precisely the profile of clergy that Cesena and the other Arbëresh colleges sought to cultivate. Many of the priests trained in Cesena, although less well-known in history, traveled to Albania to open small schools and to preach in the native language. Their mission was often accompanied by the distribution of religious books in Albanian, which constituted an essential element of both education and cultural resistance. Reports of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith mention books such as:

- The Christian Doctrine, translated from Latin catechisms, a simple manual for believers that was used both to teach the fundamentals of faith and as an initial tool of literacy.
- Various catechisms in Albanian, prepared specifically for use in Albanian parishes, which were disseminated by priests returning from Cesena.
- Translations of portions of the Gospels and liturgical books into Albanian, which served as tools for preaching and gave the faithful the opportunity to hear the message of faith in their mother tongue<sup>16</sup>.

These books were not merely devotional tools; they became cultural and linguistic instruments. Through them, Albanian acquired the status of a language suitable for religious and educational instruction, serving as a foundation for the preservation of national identity. In this sense, Cesena functioned as a quiet but highly effective base of Albanian cultural resistance. Its priests, equipped with books in Albanian and motivated by their mission, became disseminators of knowledge and identity at a time when Albania suffered from the absence of educational institutions and the constant threat of assimilation.

## The College of Loreto

The College of Loreto, founded in 1580, was among the earliest and for a long time the most important of the Arbëresh colleges. In addition to serving the formation of Albanian clergy, it became a center for publications in the Albanian language, exerting a profound influence on the preservation and development of national

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<sup>15</sup> Skendi, Stavro. 1967. *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878–1912*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

culture and language under Ottoman rule. Loreto represented a space where religion, culture, and national identity were closely interwoven, and where the Albanian book acquired the status of an instrument of cultural survival.

A particularly significant example is Frang Bardhi (1606–1643), who published the Latin–Albanian Dictionary in 1635, one of the earliest lexicographic works in the history of the Albanian language. This dictionary was not merely a linguistic tool, but also a conscious cultural act, intended to demonstrate the richness and antiquity of Albanian and to secure for it a place within the family of European languages<sup>17</sup>. Bardhi's work reflects the spirit cultivated at Loreto: the defense of the language and the writing of Albanian history. Another figure closely connected with Loreto was Pjetër Mazrreku (1600–1650). He left behind detailed reports on the condition of Albanians under Ottoman rule, which are today preserved in the archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. These reports describe the social, religious, and cultural realities of the seventeenth century, making them invaluable sources for the history of that period<sup>18</sup>. Mazrreku employed documentation not only for ecclesiastical purposes, but also as a cultural strategy to raise awareness within the Vatican about the condition of the Albanians.

Beyond these figures, Loreto was also a center for the preparation and dissemination of a series of liturgical texts and catechisms in Albanian, which proved essential for religious education and basic instruction:

- **Catechisms in Albanian, translated from Latin**, used by priests to teach children and adults the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.
- **Translated portions of the Gospels and liturgical services**, which ensured that the word of faith was preached in the native language. These texts gave Albanian a spiritual and liturgical dimension, strengthening its position in the public life of Albanian communities.
- **Apologetic and historical writings**, which defended the Christian tradition and presented Albanians as a people with ancient roots and a European identity, countering the Ottoman narrative<sup>19</sup>.

These publications make it clear that Loreto was not merely a religious school, but a center of documentation and cultural production, where the earliest texts openly affirming the Albanian language and identity were created. Through them, Loreto forged strong bridges between the Vatican and the Albanian reality, offering the European world written testimony about the language, history, and culture of the Albanians.

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<sup>17</sup> Elsie, Robert. 2005. *Albanian Literature: A Short History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>18</sup> Logoreci, Anton. 1977. *The Albanians: Europe's Forgotten Survivors*. London: Victor Gollancz.

<sup>19</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

## The Seminary of San Demetrio Corone

San Demetrio Corone, founded in 1794 in Calabria, is perhaps the best known and longest-lasting of the Arbëresh colleges. Unlike earlier colleges, which often faced temporal limitations or narrower functions, San Demetrio Corone succeeded in creating a continuous educational, cultural, and national tradition that made it a cornerstone of the Albanian National Awakening. It served not only for the training of clergy, but also became a center of the Arbëresh and Albanian intellectual elite, combining religious education with a cultural and national mission.

The most prominent figure associated with this institution is undoubtedly Jeronim De Rada (1814–1903). As a student of the seminary, he was formed not only spiritually, but also as an intellectual engaged in the cause of the Albanian nation. His work *The Songs of Milosao* (1836) is widely considered the beginning of the literature of the Albanian National Awakening. Through his poetry, De Rada intertwined myth, history, and language, elevating Albanian to the level of a cultivated literary language and transforming literature into an instrument of national consciousness<sup>20</sup>. Beyond his poetic creation, De Rada was also a publicist and political activist, using the press and intellectual organizations to keep alive the idea of Albanian freedom and independence.

San Demetrio Corone was not limited to teaching; it was a cultural laboratory. Within its walls were born and disseminated journals and periodicals that served as the voice of the Arbëresh diaspora for the national cause. Among these, the journal *Fiamuri Arbërit* (1883–1887), founded and directed by De Rada, stands out. This publication was not merely a literary magazine, but an organ of Albanian national thought in exile. Through it, ideas of independence were articulated, poetry, essays, and historical analyses were published, and a platform was created through which the Arbëresh diaspora communicated with patriots in the Albanian lands<sup>21</sup>.

The influence of San Demetrio Corone extended beyond the borders of Italy. Graduates of this seminary often returned to Albania or built bridges with patriotic circles among other Arbëresh communities, spreading books, ideas, and cultural projects that helped shape Albanian national consciousness. In this way, the seminary played a direct role in the nation-building process.

Even today, San Demetrio Corone remains a symbol of the continuity of Arbëresh culture. It demonstrates that this institution was not a religious school in the narrow sense, but a comprehensive intellectual, cultural, and political platform

<sup>20</sup> Buda, Aleks. 1985. *Probleme të Rilindjes Kombëtare Shqiptare*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave.

<sup>21</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2007. *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*. Paris: Karthala.

that kept the Albanian national identity alive in the conditions of the diaspora and contributed decisively to the National Awakening.

## **Conclusions on the Arbëresh Colleges as Precursors of the Albanian National Awakening**

Concrete examples from Palermo, Cesena, Loreto, and San Demetrio Corone clearly demonstrate that the Arbëresh colleges were not institutions confined solely to religious functions, but multidimensional centers where faith, culture, and national politics were organically intertwined. Within these spaces, a new Albanian and Arbëresh elite was formed, poets, priests, scholars, missionaries, and activists, who became carriers of historical memory, guardians of the native language, and promoters of national consciousness.

The College of Palermo produced figures who defended and affirmed the Albanian language as a spiritual and cultural element. Cesena, with its practical missionary profile, trained clergy who served as teachers and preachers in Albanian within the homeland, preserving identity under difficult conditions. Loreto became an early laboratory of Albanian publications and documentation, leaving a legacy such as Frang Bardhi's dictionary and Mazrreku's reports. Meanwhile, San Demetrio Corone marked the culmination of this development, transforming into an intellectual and political platform that directly linked the Arbëresh diaspora with the project of the Albanian National Awakening.

In this way, these colleges created an interwoven educational and cultural network that functioned as a 'parallel university' of the Albanian nation, at a time when national educational institutions were absent in the territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire. They fulfilled three essential functions:

- The linguistic function – spreading and cultivating Albanian as a written language, raising it to academic and liturgical status.
- The cultural function – creating and disseminating literature, history, and journalism in Albanian, thereby affirming national identity.
- The political and nation-building function – preparing an elite which, through literary works, preaching, and the press, kept alive the idea of Albania as a European nation worthy of independence.

Therefore, the Arbëresh colleges can be considered the first schools of the Albanian nation, which laid the ideological, linguistic, and cultural foundations of the National Awakening in the nineteenth century. They were not merely closed religious institutions, but dynamic centers of cultural and spiritual resistance that produced the human and intellectual capital necessary for the eruption of the national movement.

## From the Arbëresh Colleges to the Albanian National Awakening

The Arbëresh colleges represented a unique phenomenon in Albanian history, as they were not merely traditional religious seminaries, but institutions that combined the spiritual dimension with cultural and nation-building functions. They created a distinctive intellectual elite which, on the one hand, was closely connected to Europe, through academic contacts, the circulation of humanist ideas, and engagement with Western cultural developments, while, on the other hand, remained committed to the preservation of Albanian identity. This duality gave the elite an irreplaceable role as mediators between Western culture and the Albanian heritage.

Through the teaching of the Albanian language, the publication of books, and spiritual formation, these institutions prepared a generation that gave life to the Albanian national ideology in the nineteenth century. Within their classrooms, Albanian was disseminated as a language of liturgy, literature, and journalism, acquiring the status of a written language and moving from the level of oral tradition to a standardized cultural dimension<sup>22</sup>. This represented a major step toward the creation of a collective consciousness, in which national identity was no longer seen merely as an inherited element, but as a conscious project cultivated through education. Their importance lay in the fact that they functioned as schools of the nation long before the Albanian state itself came into existence. At a time when Albanians in their homeland lacked educational institutions in their own language, the Arbëresh colleges assumed the role of the absent national school. Within their walls, spaces were created where the history, traditions, and language of the Albanians were transmitted, providing a strong foundation for the development of an organized sense of identity. These institutions became the first laboratories of nation-building, where ideas were elaborated and the language was shaped that would later nourish the national movement and the project of independence<sup>23</sup>.

In this way, the Arbëresh colleges not only contributed to the preservation of cultural and spiritual heritage, but also created the necessary conditions for the emergence of Albanian nationalism as a modern ideology, demonstrating that the diaspora was not merely a space of memory, but an active actor in the process of nation-building.

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<sup>22</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>23</sup> Skendi, Stavro. 1967. *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878–1912*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

## Figures Emerging from the Colleges

The formation of the Arbëresh intellectual elites in the colleges of Palermo, Cesena, Loreto, and San Demetrio Corone represents one of the most significant contributions of the diaspora to Albanian cultural and national history. These institutions did not produce only clergy prepared for religious service, but also poets, publicists, scholars, and activists who became carriers of national identity. The figures who emerged from these colleges deserve special recognition for the way in which, through their works, they conferred upon the Albanian language a new literary and scholarly status, articulated the first ideas of national unity, and created channels of communication between Albanian culture and the European world. In this context, Jeronim De Rada, Zef Skiroi, and Giuseppe Schirò most clearly embody the impact of these institutions on the Albanian National Awakening.

### *Jeronim De Rada (1814–1903)*

De Rada, educated at the Seminary of San Demetrio Corone, represents the clearest example of the influence of the Arbëresh colleges on the Albanian National Awakening. With the publication of *The Songs of Milosao* (1836), he marked the birth of modern Albanian literature and opened a new era for national culture. His work was not merely a poetic creation, but also a cultural and political program aimed at demonstrating that the Albanians possessed a glorious historical, cultural, and linguistic tradition worthy of recognition by Europe. Through it, he sought to strengthen national consciousness and to create a shared historical narrative for the Albanian people<sup>24</sup>. De Rada did not confine himself to the literary sphere. In his journalism, particularly through the journal *Fiamuri Arbërit* (1848–1887), he articulated for the first time the idea of Albanian national unity, giving the National Awakening a clear cultural and political dimension. This role made him not only a poet, but also an early ideologue of Albanian nationalism, who intertwined European Romantic ideals with the project of national liberation.

### *Zef Skiroi (1865–1927)*

The Arbëresh poet and scholar Zef Skiroi, educated at the College of Palermo, used his literary work to affirm Albanian national identity and to bring it to the attention of European literary circles. His poetic creations, such as *In a Foreign Land*, reflect the longing for the homeland, the drama of Arbëresh emigration, and

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<sup>24</sup> Buda, Aleks. 1985. *Probleme të Rilindjes Kombëtare Shqiptare*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave.

the challenge of preserving identity in a foreign reality. These motifs are not merely individual, but represent the collective experience of the diaspora, which becomes a metaphor for the destiny of the Albanian nation<sup>25</sup>. Skiroi became a powerful voice for the Albanians in Italy, intertwining religious sentiment with national consciousness. He also contributed scholarly writings on the Albanian language and folklore, affirming Albanian culture at an academic level and disseminating it within intellectual circles in Italy and beyond.

### *Giuseppe Schirò (1865–1927)*

Another important figure who emerged from the College of Palermo was Giuseppe Schirò, who served as Archbishop of Durrës, playing a direct role in strengthening the Church and Albanian-language education in the Albanian territories. Through his ecclesiastical service, he defended the use of the Albanian language in liturgy and religious education, making it an important instrument of national consciousness. His cultural activity was equally wide-ranging: he published poetry, translations, and linguistic studies that placed Albanian at the center of the intellectual life of the Arbëresh community and reinforced the spiritual and cultural ties with Albania.<sup>26</sup> Through the combination of his clerical and literary roles, Schirò marked a stage in which religion, culture, and national identity functioned in harmony to support the Albanian cause.

## **Publications in the Albanian Language**

A fundamental element of the influence of the Arbëresh colleges was the publication of books in the Albanian language, a practice that gave the language a new literary, liturgical, and identity-building function. At the College of Loreto and later at the Seminary of San Demetrio Corone, liturgical texts, grammars, and Albanian poetry were translated and published, creating a lasting tradition of writing and public use of the mother tongue. These publications did not remain confined within the walls of the institutions, but were distributed among the Arbëresh communities and, often secretly, in Albania itself, directly contributing to the preservation of cultural identity in the face of Ottoman pressure and the process of Islamization<sup>27</sup>.

A paradigmatic example is Frang Bardhi's Latin–Albanian Dictionary (1635), which, although compiled earlier, created an intellectual and methodological

<sup>25</sup> Elsie, Robert. 2005. *Albanian Literature: A Short History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>26</sup> Bartl, Peter. 2001. *Albanien: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet.

<sup>27</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

precedent that would be followed by future generations educated in the colleges<sup>28</sup>. This work became a point of reference for the standardization of Albanian and for the earliest efforts at its codification. Later, the publications of Jeronim De Rada at San Demetrio Corone, and especially the Arbëresh journals such as Fiamuri Arbërit, became platforms for national ideas, where the Arbëresh diaspora for the first time articulated the vision of a free and united Albania<sup>29</sup>. In this way, the colleges were not only centers of spiritual formation, but also printing presses of the nation, making the written Albanian word a powerful instrument of national consciousness.

## The Cultural Diplomacy of the Diaspora

The Arbëresh colleges were not limited to preserving the cultural and linguistic identity of the Albanians; they also became actors of cultural diplomacy, giving the Arbëresh diaspora an indispensable role on the international stage. Intellectuals trained in these institutions used their European education, their contacts with academic circles, and their ties with the ecclesiastical world to build bridges of communication between the Albanian cause and Western public opinion. These connections served as channels of lobbying and political awareness, helping to prepare the ground for the recognition of an independent Albania in 1912<sup>30</sup>.

An emblematic example is Jeronim De Rada, who, in addition to his literary work, actively participated in international congresses and published articles in the Italian press, where he described the Albanians as a nation with Christian roots, organically connected to European civilization and worthy of statehood. This type of discourse corresponded with the strategies of other Balkan nationalisms, but in the Albanian case it had a special importance: it was a narrative constructed by the diaspora, which resonated in European cultural and political circles<sup>31</sup>.

In this sense, the cultural diplomacy of the Arbëresh diaspora can be seen as an early form of 'soft power,' in which literature, journalism, and intellectual networks functioned as political instruments. Through them, the Arbëresh succeeded in projecting a positive image of the Albanians in Europe, presenting them not as a peripheral people of the Ottoman Empire, but as a nation that naturally belonged to the family of European nations. This approach not only helped legitimize the Albanian cause, but also fostered the creation of political and cultural alliances that would later be utilized by the Albanian elites during the process of declaring independence.

<sup>28</sup> Elsie, Robert. 2005. *Albanian Literature: A Short History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>29</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2007. *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>30</sup> Puto, Arben. 2009. *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit dhe ideologjia kombëtare shqiptare*. Tiranë: Dituria.

<sup>31</sup> Kola, Paulin. 2003. *The Search for Greater Albania*. London: Hurst & Company.

## From Religious Culture to National Identity

The influence of the Arbëresh colleges in Albanian history cannot be fully understood without analyzing the organic interweaving of religious culture and national identity. For the Holy See, these institutions represented an important instrument for consolidating the Catholic presence in a region dominated by the Ottoman Empire and for curbing the spread of Islam. Yet for the Arbëresh and the Albanian intellectuals trained there, the colleges served above all as platforms of national survival, where faith and nationhood were bound together in a distinctive historical synthesis<sup>32</sup>.

This duality makes it clear that the Albanian National Awakening possessed a unique character compared to other Balkan nationalisms. It was nourished initially by the spiritual roots and Christian traditions kept alive in the diaspora, but later gradually transformed into a political and national project oriented toward independence and state modernization. In this sense, the liturgy in Albanian, the publication of religious texts, and the training of Arbëresh clergy were not merely acts of devotion, but also conscious cultural and nation-building strategies<sup>33</sup>.

For this very reason, the Arbëresh colleges can be regarded as one of the foundational pillars of Albanian national consciousness, for they created a space where religious faith and national identity were not mutually exclusive but instead reinforced one another. This model of intertwining faith and nation, constructed in the diaspora, explains why the Albanian National Awakening relied so heavily on figures formed in these institutions, who in their work united both the spiritual heritage and the national ideal.

## Conclusions on the Role of the Arbëresh Colleges in the Albanian National Awakening

From the analysis of the figures, publications, and activities of the Arbëresh colleges, it becomes clear that these institutions were not merely religious centers but transformed into direct precursors of the Albanian National Awakening. They shaped an intellectual elite that, nourished by the values of Christianity and European humanism, succeeded in intertwining spiritual faith with the national ideal. This elite became the bearer of the ideas of independence and of the affirmation of the Albanian nation at a time when national consciousness was still in formation.

<sup>32</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2012. *Religion et nation chez les Albanais aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>33</sup> Skendi, Stavro. 1967. *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878–1912*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Through Albanian-language publications, the use of the mother tongue in liturgy, journalism, and cultural diplomacy, the Arbëresh colleges created a new identity discourse that positioned the Albanian nation as an integral part of European civilization. Figures such as Jeronim De Rada, Zef Skiroi, and Giuseppe Schirò were concrete examples of this process, using the pen, the spoken word, and public activity as instruments of national awareness.

Therefore, the history of the Albanian National Awakening cannot be fully understood without taking into account the role of the Arbëresh diaspora and its colleges, which acted as laboratories of Albanian nation-building and as bridges between the Vatican, Italy, and the Albanian lands. These institutions demonstrate that the Albanian nation was born not only from efforts within the homeland, but also from the intellectual energy of the diaspora, which made the Albanian question present on the European cultural and political stage

## The Legacy of the Arbëresh Colleges in Modern Albanian Culture

The Arbëresh colleges, especially San Demetrio Corone, continued to operate with intensity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, becoming guarantors of Albanian cultural heritage in exile. Their role was not limited to the training of clergy, but extended to the preservation and transmission of the Albanian language, customs, and historical memory to younger generations. At a time when, in the Albanian lands, the language itself faced the risk of extinction due to Ottoman prohibitions and the absence of Albanian educational institutions, the Arbëresh colleges created spaces where Albanian was institutionalized as a language of liturgy, instruction, and culture, thus protecting it from assimilation.

These institutions kept alive not only the written language, through the publication of liturgical books, grammars, and literary works, but also the spoken language, ensuring that it remained an integral part of spiritual education and everyday community life. As a result, the Arbëresh communities in Calabria, Sicily, and Molise still today stand as a living testimony to this historical mission. In these settlements, an archaic dialect of Albanian continues to be spoken, directly linked to the tradition of the language preserved and transmitted through the colleges and through the Byzantine liturgy in the mother tongue<sup>34</sup>. This dialect, which has survived for more than five centuries, stands as tangible evidence of the role these institutions played as guardians of national identity.

One of the most distinguished figures associated with San Demetrio Corone is Jeronim De Rada (1814–1903), who studied there and later became a renowned poet, publicist, and activist of the Albanian National Awakening. His work

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<sup>34</sup> Clayer, Nathalie. 2007. *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*. Paris: Karthala.

The Songs of Milosao (1836) is regarded as a cornerstone of modern Albanian literature and as a poetic manifesto of national identity. Through his journal *Fiamuri Arbërit*, De Rada transformed the college and the Arbëresh diaspora into a genuine intellectual platform where the ideas of Albanian freedom and nationhood were articulated.

Another figure is Gavril Dara the Younger (1826–1885), also connected with Arbëresh cultural circles, who left behind the epic poem *The Last Song of Bala*, a poetic testament that intertwines Albanian myths with the romantic spirit of the nineteenth century. Likewise, Zef Skiroi (1865–1927) and Giuseppe Schirò (1836–1927), both educated in these institutions, contributed through poetry, journalism, and ecclesiastical activity to affirming the Albanian language as a language worthy of both culture and faith.

These personalities, emerging from the Arbëresh colleges, demonstrate that San Demetrio Corone and similar institutions served not only as educational centers for the generations of the National Awakening but also as carriers of the historical and cultural continuity of the Arbëresh into the present day. They created a bridge linking the early centuries of the diaspora with contemporary reality, proving that the preservation of language and culture was not a spontaneous process, but the result of sustained institutional and communal effort, today constituting one of the most valuable treasures of the Albanian heritage in Europe.

## The Impact on Albanian Culture and Education

The figures educated in the Arbëresh colleges contributed not only in the nineteenth century and during the National Awakening, but also directly influenced the construction of the Albanian state after 1912. Their educational and spiritual legacy created a durable model that was reflected in the state-building projects of the twentieth century.

A particularly significant example is Fan Noli (1882–1965). Although he was not a direct student of the Arbëresh colleges, the experience and tradition of these institutions shaped his vision. Noli was influenced by the Arbëresh heritage and its early ties with the Vatican and Western culture, bringing this spirit into Albania through his project of a national church, in which the Albanian language was placed at the center of liturgy and spiritual life<sup>35</sup>. This concept reflected the centuries-old experience of the Arbëresh colleges, which had employed Albanian in education and preaching, making it a sanctified language and a constitutive part of national identity.

The influence of the Arbëresh colleges was also strongly felt in the field of education. Many of the teachers of the first Albanian schools at the end of the

<sup>35</sup> Puto, Arben. 2009. *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit dhe ideologjia kombëtare shqiptare*. Tiranë: Dituria.

nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century were indirectly connected with the Arbëresh tradition, whether through books published by Arbëresh intellectuals or through diaspora networks that circulated books, ideas, and material support. Through this 'chain effect,' the Arbëresh colleges laid the groundwork for the modern Albanian school, shaping the spread of literacy and affirming Albanian as a language of education and culture.

Thus, their influence is not confined to the historical dimension of the National Awakening, but extends into a long-term process that includes the building of Albanian state institutions and the development of national culture in the twentieth century.

## **Albania–Vatican Relations**

Another essential aspect of the legacy of the Arbëresh colleges is their role as a bridge between Albania and the Holy See. From their foundation, these institutions served not only as centers of education and religion but also as channels of communication between the Vatican and the Albanians, ensuring that the connection with the Western Catholic world remained alive even during the difficult periods of Ottoman rule. Through them, Albanians became part of a cultural and spiritual dialogue that placed them within the European orbit at a time when the political and military isolation of the Ottoman Empire limited direct access to the West.

In the twentieth century, this Arbëresh tradition of mediation became an important factor in Albania's integration into Western Europe. The Arbëresh, through their academic, ecclesiastical, and cultural networks, contributed to shaping an image of Albania as a country with deep European roots and an identity formed by religious coexistence and by its early ties with the Holy See.

A symbolic moment in this regard was the visit of Pope John Paul II to Tirana in 1993, immediately after the fall of the communist regime. During this visit, the Pope publicly praised the historical role of the Arbëresh as guardians of Albanian identity and as those who kept alive the link with the Vatican during the darkest periods of history<sup>36</sup>. This gesture of the Holy See was not only a religious act but also a political and cultural message, positioning Albania as part of the tradition of European Christianity and Western culture. This legacy continues to have an impact today, helping to construct a positive image of Albania as a country with a long tradition of religious tolerance and with early and enduring ties to Europe. In this sense, the role of the Arbëresh colleges extends beyond educational and cultural history: they have served as an instrument of cultural diplomacy that has supported Albania in its path toward international recognition and European integration.

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<sup>36</sup> Kola, Paulin. 2003. *The Search for Greater Albania*. London: Hurst & Company.

## The Arbëresh and Albanian Identity in the Diaspora

The legacy of the Arbëresh colleges is also evident in the roles that the Arbëresh assumed as cultural ambassadors of the Albanians, transmitting Albanian culture and identity in Italy and across Europe. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their activity has not diminished; on the contrary, it has taken new forms, linked to scholarly and literary publications, the organization of international congresses, and the promotion of Albanian culture within broader academic and cultural spaces.

Many Italian academic institutions have established chairs of Albanian language and culture, which are historically connected to the work of the Arbëresh colleges and to the efforts of the figures who emerged from them<sup>37</sup>. These chairs not only affirm the importance of Albanian as a subject of university study, but also testify to the continuity of an intellectual tradition with deep roots in the Arbëresh contribution to the preservation and development of Albanian identity.

In addition to publications and academic activity, cultural festivals such as the *Settimana della Cultura Arbëreshe* in Calabria play an important role in promoting Arbëresh heritage. These festivals commemorate emblematic figures of the National Awakening, such as Jeronim De Rada, and highlight the legacy of the colleges as institutions that intertwined education, religion, and national culture. Such events are not merely remembrances of the past, but living expressions of Arbëresh identity in the diaspora, building bridges of communication between Arbëresh communities and Italian society, as well as between the diaspora and Albania itself.

In this way, the Arbëresh continue to serve as ambassadors of Albanian culture, demonstrating that the legacy of the colleges has not remained confined to history, but represents a living cultural capital that still contributes to the recognition and affirmation of Albanians on the international stage

## Academic and Cultural Appraisal Today

In contemporary scholarship, the Arbëresh colleges are being re-evaluated as laboratories of Albanian nation-building, where religion, culture, and national identity merged into a unique historical project. Renowned scholars such as Nathalie Clayer (2007), Stavro Skendi (1967), and Robert Elsie (2005) have emphasized that without these institutions it would be impossible to fully understand the Albanian National Awakening and the process that led to the declaration of Albania's independence in 1912. The colleges functioned as centers

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<sup>37</sup> Gawrych, George. 2006. *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913*. London: I.B. Tauris.

for the formation of intellectual and spiritual elites, building a bridge between Albanian tradition and European culture.

Today, the archives of the colleges are preserved as a valuable cultural and historical treasure, serving as a constant object of research for Albanologists and historians of the diaspora. The documents, ecclesiastical reports, liturgical books, and Albanian-language publications produced in Palermo, Loreto, or San Demetrio Corone have become key sources for the study of Albanian literature and language, as well as for the history of Albanian political thought.

This heritage is not merely a memory of the past, but a living foundation for new studies that help us to better understand not only the history of the Awakening and the formation of Albanian national identity, but also the strategic role played by the Arbëresh diaspora in intertwining Albanian and European culture. In this sense, the Arbëresh colleges remain an interpretive key to Albanian nation-building, demonstrating that their cultural and spiritual project still retains relevance in historical and Albanological scholarship.

## **Conclusions on the Legacy of the Arbëresh Colleges**

The legacy of the Arbëresh colleges is multidimensional: they served as centers for the preservation of the Albanian language and culture at a time when both were threatened by assimilation; they shaped the intellectual and spiritual elites who guided the processes of the Albanian National Awakening; they created enduring bridges between Albania and the Holy See, keeping the country connected to Western Europe; and they contributed to the dissemination of Albanian culture within Italian and broader European academic and cultural circles.

In this sense, the Arbëresh colleges were not merely religious educational institutions of a diaspora community, but schools of the Albanian nation, where faith, culture, and national identity were woven into a common project. They laid the foundations of modern Albanian identity, situating Albania within a historical and cultural continuity with Western Europe.

This legacy remains today a cultural and identitarian treasure not only for the Arbëresh communities, but for all Albanians, demonstrating that the process of Albanian nation-building cannot be understood without acknowledging their historical role and the networks of knowledge, faith, and culture they produced.

## **Implications for Research, Theory, and Society**

At the theoretical level, this study contributes to debates on nationalism and diaspora studies by demonstrating that diaspora-based religious institutions can function as proto-national infrastructures, particularly in contexts where state

institutions are absent. The Arbëresh case shows how religion and education may serve as vehicles for national identity formation.

From a research perspective, the findings invite comparative studies with other diasporas, such as Armenian, Greek, or Maronite communities, where religious institutions played a similar mediating role between homeland and host societies. Such comparisons may further clarify the relationship between faith, diaspora, and nation-building.

At the societal level, the study highlights the long-term importance of diaspora institutions in preserving endangered languages and cultural identities. The Arbëresh experience offers insights relevant to contemporary discussions on cultural heritage preservation, minority education, and the role of diasporas in sustaining national identity beyond state borders.

In addition, the findings may inform contemporary policy debates on minority education, religious pluralism, and diaspora engagement, particularly in contexts where cultural preservation intersects with transnational institutional support.

## Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the Arbëresh diaspora in Italy was not merely a displaced or symbolic community, but an organized and historically active agent in the preservation and transformation of Albanian national and religious identity. Through a network of religious colleges established between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Arbëresh created stable institutional structures that connected the Vatican with Albanian society at a time when political sovereignty and national educational systems were absent. These colleges functioned as durable mechanisms through which language, historical memory, and cultural norms were preserved and transmitted across generations.

The analysis has shown that Arbëresh colleges such as Palermo, Cesena, Loreto, and San Demetrio Corone operated as identity-producing institutions, where religious education was inseparable from cultural and national formation. By embedding the Albanian language within liturgy, education, and publication, these institutions elevated it to a legitimate medium of spiritual, intellectual, and national expression. In doing so, they produced a transnational elite, clergy, poets, scholars, and publicists, who acted as mediators between the Vatican and Albanian society and who played a decisive role in preparing the ideological and cultural foundations of the Albanian National Awakening.

More broadly, the Arbëresh case illustrates how diaspora-based religious institutions can function as proto-national infrastructures, capable of sustaining national identity beyond territorial borders and prior to state formation. By conceptualizing the diaspora as an institutional actor rather than a peripheral

cultural community, this article contributes to wider debates on nationalism, diaspora studies, and religion-nation relations. The legacy of the Arbëresh colleges thus confirms that nation-building processes often emerge not only within the homeland, but also through transnational networks where faith, education, and culture converge to shape collective identity and historical continuity.

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