WOVEN IDENTITY: TRADITIONAL ARBËRESH COSTUMES OF SICILY (PIANA DEGLI ALBANESI AND SANTA CRISTINA GELA): HISTORICAL RESEARCH FOR APPLIED VALORIZATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the textile heritage of the Arbëreshë communities in Sicily, specifically in the towns of Piana degli Albanesi (Hora e Arbwreshwvet) and Santa Cristina Gela (Swndahstina), within the broader historical context of the island's Albanian-speaking settlements, which also include Palazzo Adriano (Palac Adriano), Contessa Entellina (Kundisa), and Mezzojuso (Munxifsi). Established from the 15th century onwards, following the diaspora triggered by Ottoman expansion in the Balkans, these Arbëresh centers in Sicily have preserved a remarkable ethno-linguistic and liturgical identity over the centuries. The study demonstrates how this identity finds its most profound visual and semiotic expression in the art of traditional costume, interpreted not as a static relic, but as a dynamic cultural device and a historical "text" to be decoded. The research is based on a rigorous philological investigation, conducted through the cataloging and analysis of documentary and historical photographic sources. This survey has made it possible to map the morphological evolution of the garments and to develop a systematic typological classification. The study defines the transitions and social stratifications that distinguish everyday attire, "semi-festive" (or intermediate) dress, formal festive wear, and wedding attire. For each type, the following are examined: structural elements and historical models to be preserved; decorative motifs, which provide a stylistic and artistic overview of the attire, a cultural background essential for determining the date of manufacture and the stylistic influences that have shaped the garment into its present form; accessories and jewelry, which facilitate a semiotic and symbolic decoding of the attire. Particular attention is devoted to the tailoring craftsmanship and the micro-technological excellence of the embroidery techniques. The research delves into the material dimension of the artifacts, describing the use of exceptionally high-quality yarns and raw materials, most notably 24-karat gold, employed in intricate, hand-stitched embroidery on fine fabrics. 6This level of mastery is examined in relation to the variations and enduring features found in the traditional attire of other historical Sicilian-**Arbëresh** communities, namely Palazzo Adriano, Contessa Entellina, and Mezzojuso, thereby highlighting both shared identity markers and distinct local characteristics. The second part of the work shifts from historiographical theory to the contemporary practice of heritage preservation. It addresses the critical subject of modern textile restoration and preventive conservation techniques, essential for halting the biological and structural degradation of centuries-old artifacts and ensuring their physical survival. Finally, the study presents an operational model for outreach and regeneration, centered on the implementation of specialized vocational training courses within the local area.

Keywords: ***Arbëresh, Piana degli Albanesi, Santa Cristina Gela, iconographic research, embroidery techniques, textile restoration, applied heritage valorization.***

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The Arbëreshë Women's Costume Of Sicily

Analysis, Typology, Materials, Construction Techniques





Piana degli Albanesi
Hora e Arbëreshëvet



Santa Cristina Gela
Shëndahstine





Breve storia dei comuni Arbëreshe di Sicilia

The settlements in Sicily—as in the rest of Italy—were established following the flight of Albanians from their homeland, driven by the Ottoman (Turkic-Muslim) advance into Europe. This advance was halted by the army of the Church's champion, George Kastrioti Skanderbeg—a great Albanian leader who forged agreements with the Papacy specifically to stop the Turkish encroachment into Europe. George Kastrioti died in 1468; it was around this time—both shortly before and after[1] —that groups of exiles formed and reached the coasts of Italy and Sicily. The Arbëreshë-founded municipalities in Sicily, listed by their date of establishment, include: Contessa Entellina, where the earliest settlements in the hamlet of *Kundisa* (a toponym derived from the name of Countess Eleonora d'Aragona Cardona Peralta, whose descendants established the founding charters) date to around 1480, with the formal founding charters issued in 1520; Palazzo Adriano—known as *Pallaçi* in the Arbëreshë language—founded in 1482, with founding charters confirmed in 1501, 1507, and 1563; Biancavilla (formerly called *Callicari*), with founding charters dating to 1488, later confirmed in 1501, 1506, and 1558; Bronte, which was founded during the same period as Biancavilla; and Piana dei Greci—later renamed Piana degli Albanesi (the name was changed in 1941, during the Fascist era)—known in the Arbëreshë language as *Hora e Arbëreshëvet*, which was founded... In August 1488, the founding charters were established; they were

[1] [Following the death of George Kastrioti and the abandonment of northern Albanian territories by Venice, Albania fell under Ottoman rule. In fact, as early as the mid-15th century (1443), an initial wave of Albanian migration to Calabria took place; these individuals, led by Demetrio Reres and serving the Kingdom of Naples, arrived to quell a revolt. A second wave followed—while Skanderbeg was still alive—to assist King Ferdinand I against the Angevins and the barons, in exchange for which they received fiefs in Puglia. These Albanians also established settlements in the Molise region; further groups arrived after Skanderbeg's death, drawn by the presence of the aforementioned communities already in the Kingdom of Naples. The most significant migration—the third—occurred following the fall of Krujë (Croia) to the Turks in 1478, leading to the establishment of colonies in the territory of Cosenza and in Sicily. A fourth wave originated from the Morea, following the Turkish conquest of the fortress of Coron (Corone); these refugees settled in Basilicata, with a smaller number also settling in the Cosenza area. Subsequent migrations were sporadic and minor in scale; the final wave, in 1744, saw a group from southern Albania settle in Badessa, in the province of Teramo. Within the Kingdom of Naples, the original Albanian settlers served as soldiers (notably in the *Reggimento Real Macedone*, or Royal Macedonian Regiment) and were granted land, though under very burdensome conditions.] *Francesco bonasera, La Sicilia Albanese, bollettino della società geografica italiana , Roma- ser. XI, vol. II, 1985, pp. 310-311*

subsequently confirmed in 1565, 1574, 1588, and 1606. Mezzojouso—known as *Munxifsi* in Arabic and *Menzujous* in Arbëresh—has founding charters dating back to 1501. Sant'Angelo Muxaro, referred to as *Muxari* in Arbëresh, was founded around 1511 by Albanian settlers arriving from Palazzo Adriano. San Michele di Ganzaria was founded in 1534 by settlers from Mezzojouso, with its charters confirmed in 1554. Finally, in 1691, Santa Cristina Gela (*Shëndahstina* in Arbëresh) was established by 82 farmers from Piana degli Albanesi, under an *emphyteusis* (long-term lease) agreement with the Archiepiscopal See of Palermo. Of these nine Arbëresh colonies, only five—Contessa Entellina, Palazzo Adriano, Piana degli Albanesi, Mezzojouso, and Santa Cristina Gela—retain the Greek-Byzantine rite and belong to the Eparchy of Piana degli Albanesi; only three—Piana degli Albanesi, Santa Cristina Gela, and Contessa Entellina—still speak the Arbëresh language.

This Sicilian ethnic group chose to preserve its own distinct political, linguistic, cultural, and religious system. For centuries, the inhabitants of the Arbëresh towns in Sicily have identified themselves as *gjaku i shprishur* (literally: "scattered blood"), signifying their enduring connection to their motherland, despite being far from their native soil. This has created a unique presence within the Sicilian landscape—a landscape already characterized by its great diversity. Over the centuries, the Arbëresh people of Sicily have safeguarded their identity, maintaining a robust cultural vitality. The most evident form of cultural vitality is expressed through our traditional costumes, which evoke our religious faith as well as ancient and precious artisanal crafts. Among the five villages, there are distinct variations in how the costume tradition is upheld, depending on the specific locality. Within the material heritage of the Sicilian Arbëreshë costumes, the most significant body of work—in terms of both quantity and the high quality of its intricate, decorative craftsmanship—comes from Piana degli Albanesi; here, one can identify specific styles of attire and various types of embroidery.

N.B. The traditional dress of Santa Cristina is identical to that of Piana, though it features a more limited range of variations; therefore, I will describe both styles of dress simultaneously, drawing comparisons between them.



Everyday Attire in Santa Cristina Gela

Until the early 1980s, some of the older women of Santa Cristina Gela could still be seen wearing their traditional everyday attire, which consisted of the following:

• *xhëllona e zezë* – a black pleated skirt made of wool cloth or heavy cotton, with pleats gathered at the waist;

• *xhipuni i zi* – a black or blue jacket made of wool cloth, heavy cotton, silk, or silk taffeta. It featured puffed sleeves with pleats at the top and was fastened at the waist with mother-of-pearl buttons; a cord threaded between the buttons pulled the garment tight, functioning much like a corset;

• *skamandili qafje i bardh* – a white neckerchief, worn to cover the low-cut neckline of the *xhipuni*, which would otherwise have revealed a deep décolletage—considered inappropriate for the standards of the time. A brooch was often pinned to this kerchief to hold it in place and add a touch of elegance.

For Sundays and during the winter months, a *mandillina* (small cape/shawl) was added to the ensemble. It was light green or light blue, made of wool cloth or heavy cotton, and featured white trim. The fabric for this accessory was cut into a crescent shape and edged with

ottoman (ribbed silk) ribbon. At the center, between the two points of the crescent, two decorative shapes—resembling flowers or hearts—were fashioned from the same *ottoman* ribbon and attached to the garment.

The "semi-festive" or everyday attire





Worn on Sundays, this ensemble consists of the following: *Xhëllona*—a black skirt with pleats at the waist; and *Xhipuni*—a jacket in black, blue, or dark green, made of velvet, brocaded velvet, or heavy cotton. The cut is the same as that of the everyday version: a jacket featuring puffed sleeves with pleats at the top and a "shawl" neckline. It includes *kulari* and *pucet*—a collar and cuffs embroidered in gold—as well as a *petini*, a white or ivory-colored insert (or "bib") adorned with fine lace. A *skamandili qafje i bardh*—a white neckerchief made of silk or very lightweight cotton—could be worn to close the neckline, either in place of or in addition to the *petini*; a *battipetto* (breast-piece) brooch could also be attached to it. Other elements include the *vanterja*, a black apron made of cotton or taffeta, and the *shkoca a prapa*, a white bow worn at the back, fashioned from taffeta or pure silk faille and decorated with picturesque gold embroidery. The only jewelry worn with this outfit is the *rrusari* (a rosary-style necklace) featuring garnet stones and filigree beads, complete with a pendant depicting the Sacred Heart of Jesus or other religious imagery.





The festive dress—in its oldest form, dating back to the late 15th century and still found in Piana and Santa Cristina—features a distinctive design rooted in Balkan traditions. The skirt, crafted from *faglia* (a type of ribbed silk) or *mola* (pure silk), is adorned with gold-trimmed ruffles known in the Arbëreshë language as *xhëllona* (pronounced: *giuhona*). The number of lace ruffles—referred to as *kurore* (“crowns”)—on the skirt served as an indicator of the wealth and social standing of the family to which the young woman wearing the dress belonged. The more *kurore* present on a *xhëllona*, the more the family was noble and wealthy. According to a recent discovery of mine, the *Curore* have a specific connection to Balkan craftsmanship: bobbin lace-making using metallic thread is still practiced today on the island of Salamis—though this line of research will be explored in a separate discussion.

The upper garment, or *gippuni* (jacket)—made of velvet or silk satin—features an attached *cullari* (collar) and *pucet* (cuffs), both embroidered in gold using the *oro posato* (laid-gold) and padded embroidery technique. The ensemble is completed by the *vanterja* (apron), crafted from fine taffeta and black lace; the *Shkoka a Prapa* (a bow worn at the back), which is embroidered in gold using various techniques—such as laid-gold, cutwork on canvas, or bobbin lace with additional embroidery—and is typically white, set against a background of pure silk *faglia* (faille) or taffeta; the *Shkoka te Kriet* (a bow worn on the head), made of pure silk *faglia*, silk taffeta, or velvet—available in green, light blue, burgundy, or white—

and embroidered in gold using the *oro posato* technique; and the *Mandellina* (a small cape or mantle), in light blue or white, which is embroidered with fine gold thread directly onto the fabric using the *oro posato* technique and represents the mantle of the Virgin Mary.



Over time, the *fiocco* (bow/knot) headpiece replaced the traditional, ancient head covering known as the *Kesa*. The *Kesa* was crafted from pure silk faille or velvet and overlaid with bobbin lace—sometimes embroidered with gold thread, sometimes left plain. (In its oldest form, dating back to the late 15th century, the *Kesa*—featuring gold bobbin lace—was worn in both Piana and Santa Cristina.) It consists of a band approximately 40 cm long and 10 cm wide. At its upper end, a small, round, padded element (about 2 cm in diameter) is attached; this sits against the head, following a U-shaped, horizontal contour that extends from the forehead across the crown. At the opposite end, a gold cord is sewn on, finished with *giumbi* (tassels or weighted ornaments) that provide the necessary weight to ensure the band hangs straight down along the back of the neck. Although this headpiece has largely fallen out of use, it is still employed in Piana to secure the black mantle (*mënti*) worn on Good Friday and for securing the silk bridal veil (*villi*) for the wedding dress from Piana degli Albanesi.



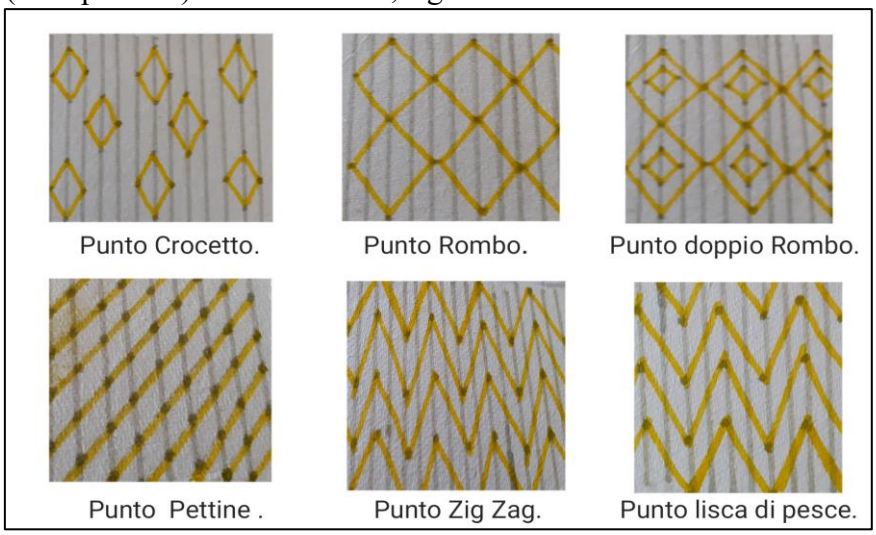
Another option for festive attire involves wearing a *pampinja* (a floral-patterned skirt) instead of the *xhëllona* (a skirt adorned with *kurore*). The *pampinja* is a skirt made of silk brocade or silk lampas, available in various colors and featuring diverse floral motifs.

This type of skirt is significantly less valuable than the *xhëllona*, as it consists merely of fabric produced on a mechanical loom—typically of Venetian or Neapolitan origin.



The 18th-century dress reform: during the 1700s, a transformation in attire took place—influenced by the Spanish presence in the region—in which skirts were entirely embroidered with gold using the "laid-gold" (*oro posato*) technique. Known as "*ncilone*," these skirts featured floral designs reminiscent of the embroidery found on the sacred vestments of that era.

The embroidery process consists of several stages: first, the fabric—typically pure silk faille, *mola* (a type of silk fabric), or velvet—is prepared with a design. This is done either by drawing directly onto the fabric or by creating a design on paper and transferring it using a carbon-paper-like technique: a negative version of the design is prepared on tissue paper and then traced onto the fabric by flipping the paper over. Second, the fabric is stretched onto an embroidery frame. Third, the embroidery is executed using a technique known as "laid gold" (*oro posato*). In this method, a gold thread is laid across the surface of the fabric and secured in place with stitches—made using cotton or silk thread—that pass through the fabric, anchoring the gold thread while following the lines of the design. done beforehand on the same fabric.



The yellow dots represent the stitches that pass through the fabric to secure the gold threads, while the gray lines represent the gold threads that are laid down in order to be fastened.

In this case, the gold thread does not perform the embroidery itself but rather serves as a filler;



the embroidery is executed using cotton thread, which secures the gold at various points to create a pattern within the filled area (such as herringbone, cross-stitch, checkerboard, comb-like, zigzag, and so on).

The chart below illustrates several stitching techniques, as described by Gina Cusenza, coordinator and organizer of the training course titled "Labora Antichi Mestieri" ("Labora: Ancient Crafts"), established by the municipality of Santa Cristina Gela in 2000. The 24-karat gold thread used for this embroidery is a precious, highly durable, and pliable material. Because it cannot be passed through the fabric over long distances—as the tension could tear the textile—it is instead applied to the surface. The thread consists of a core (or support) made of silk or cotton, around which a finely drawn metallic wire is coiled. In the past, this thread was sold by weight, measured on a precision scale used for precious metals. The thread can appear in various shades of golden yellow or in a silvery tone. Today, it is sold on 25-gram spools and is quite costly.

The various ways of wearing the *riforma* (reform-style) dress of the eighteenth century:
The embroidered skirt, known as *ncilona*, could be worn either with the *lignja* or with the *xhipuni*—along with an embroidered vest referred to in the Arbëresh language as *krahet* (literally "arms"). This term alludes to the form of the traditional wedding dress, which also incorporates embroidered arms or sleeves (*mëngat*). The *lignja*, or shirt, is a distinctive element of the Arbëresh costume, also found in the traditional attire worn in Calabria. It is a shirt featuring very wide, cuffless sleeves, edged with bobbin lace, *valenciennes* lace, or





intaglio (cutwork) embroidery—the latter of which also adorns the neckline. The garment is entirely hand-sewn and hand-embroidered. At the top of each sleeve, there is a "honeycomb" pattern—a series of tiny, precise pleats that gather the full width of the sleeve, creating a decorative design within the folds. The neckline is also quite wide and is gathered into a broad, structured band (*pistagna*), which is typically embellished with loom-woven satin-stitch embroidery, needlepoint, or *intaglio* (cutwork). The embroidery from the neckline is repeated on the side sections of the front.Con la riforma del vestito il gilet (krahet) viene indossato anche con la Xhëllona non solo con la Ncilona.

It is, in effect, a vest without buttons, which is tied at the front by threading a cord through eyelets—fashioned for this purpose using small iron rings—set into the fabric. The vest is also decorated with gold thread couched onto the material, or adorned with bobbin-lace bands that are narrower than those found on the... Xhëllona.





From the 18th century onwards, traditional attire was enriched by jewelry crafted in Palermo in the Baroque style. Notable pieces include: *Pindaiet*—ear pendants featuring diamonds, rubies, and emeralds; and *Kriqja e kurçet*—a multi-part gold chest ornament set with rubies, emeralds, or diamonds. This piece consists of a top brooch, an elongated connecting element, a small butterfly-shaped component, and, at the base, a cross. The length can be adjusted by removing the brooch or certain central sections as desired. The cross, however, is never removed; it can even be worn on its own as a pendant on a velvet or satin ribbon around the neck. Another piece is the *Domanti*—a ring featuring diamonds (often rose-cut). Circular in shape, its setting holds at least six precious stones; it is traditionally given by a fiancé to his fiancée as a wedding gift. Then there is the *Rrusari*—a rosary-style necklace. The term derives from *ruasanj*, meaning "round stones" (referring to the beads of the necklace), and it is a piece with distinct Balkan roots. The necklace consists of garnet beads interspersed with silver and gold filigree pearls, joined at the center by a *coruzza*—a complex, four-cylindrical gold weave that connects the main pendant to the chain. This pendant typically represents the Sacred Heart of Jesus; it features a silver base shaped like a pierced heart, topped with a piece of colored glass (most commonly red, though green or light blue are also found). The entire assembly is held together by three small floral motifs set with rubies, emeralds, or other colored precious stones. The pendant could also contain other sacred images.

The introduction of the *brezi* into the traditional costume of Santa Cristina.

Today, the *brezi*—a silver belt—is worn as part of the festive attire. Traditionally, it was worn by married women and featured the image of the patron saint of the wearer’s family. In reality, for us in Santa Cristina (*Sëdahstinare*), the use of the *brezi* follows the style of Piana degli Albanesi; it has only been in fashion here for the last fifteen years or so.

The *brezi* was not originally part of our traditional costumes. By the time this accessory was incorporated into the attire in Piana degli Albanesi, our settlers were in the process of moving from Piana to Santa Cristina (under the *enfiteusi*—a long-term land lease—of 1691). Consequently, they did not have the opportunity to see the use of this accessory become established among the women of that region. This evolution of the costume in Piana took place between the end of the 17th century and the middle of the 18th century. According to the scholar Chiaramonte, the earliest *brezi* dates back to 1711: "…an Arbëresh-style women's belt is held in a private collection in Marsala; it is a silver belt consisting of 13 plaques, dated 1711 and marked 'GL'—likely the initials of the then-consul of the jewelers' guild in Palermo, Giuseppe Leone (cf. Di Natale 1989, pp. 268–269)." [2]

In fact, Stefano Schirò points to examples dating back at least three *brezi* (waist-belt) generations: a buckle—hollowed out to house a figure of Saint Joseph with the Child Jesus and topped with a crown—paired with a belt featuring metal plaques decorated with a radiant sun and daisies in the four corners, dating to 1680; a belt depicting Saint Michael the Archangel, owned by Senator Andrea Guerneri and crafted in Palermo in 1703, which shows Saint Michael holding a sword in the center, with an eagle—wings raised toward the heavens—positioned below him, and a crown held by angels above; and another belt, owned by Mrs. Euphrosyne Whitaker, which features Saint George slaying the dragon—also a Palermitan piece, dating to 1710. Alongside the creation of these magnificent jewels, an appropriate "attire" was developed to complement such an important accessory.

From the 18th century onward in Piana degli Albanesi, the *brezi* was worn with the *ncilona* (a skirt entirely embroidered with fine gold thread) and the *linja* (a white blouse with voluminous sleeves)—garments embroidered in Piana degli Albanesi during that period—rather than with the *xhëllona me kurorë* (a skirt featuring bands or "crowns") and the *xhipuni* (a short jacket) that had been brought by the settlers of 1691 and had by then become *sëndahstinari* (heirlooms/relics of the past).

The *brezi* thus became a symbol of fertility and a blessing for the family. Over time, it took on a beautiful significance within the context of the betrothal ritual: the suitor would present it to his fiancée, and, according to tradition, upon giving this precious gift, he would say to her: "Just as this belt encircles you, so too do I encircle you with my love" (or words to that effect). Consequently, the *brezi* did not originally exist in Santa Cristina Gela—appearing only in a few instances by the beginning of the nineteenth century, a period when the Musacchia family gained a certain prominence in the village, thanks to its patriarch, Emanuele Musacchia[3] who became the most significant landowner in the area—a position that, thanks to his wealth, enabled him to commission such gems.

Through a semiotic analysis of the designs of various garments across the centuries, one can discern the influence of the prevailing fashions of the time; yet, while these trends were incorporated, the overall character of the attire remained fundamentally unchanged throughout the ages.

The 18th-century bridal attire—a triumph of vestment and symbolism—comprises several key elements: the sleeves (*mëngath*) and the *kesa* (headdress), which supports a silk veil (*villi*)—a symbol of the marital home—along with twelve bows representing the twelve apostles. Completing the ensemble is the *bresi* (sash), which bears an image of the patron saint of the woman and her family. Every aspect of the bridal attire points to the sacred nature of marriage.

[2] Zef Chiaramonte, *Simboli Rispetto Alla Generazione Arbëresh Della Sposa*, DIASPORA SHQIPTARE –Attualità 03/10/2020 https://diasporashqiptare.al/2020/10/03/simbole-te-krahasuara-te-brezi-arberesh-i-nuses/?fbclid=IwAR1jJe2qBl0o-_XUMBX0Oo2HYtFEKdtO6gi11gIuiPJHy4ZMV1ALHVhpiIg

[3] Zef Giuseppe Chiaramonte, *La terra di Costantino, Bizantini Arabi Normanni e Albanesi a S. Cristina Gela fonti documentarie,* pag. 94 e pag. 111.

The Arbëreshë Attire of Palazzo Adriano

In March 1776, a French painter—having secured funding from the French government—arrived in Sicily as part of a renowned "Grand Tour." During his stay, he visited several towns, including Palazzo Adriano, where he created paintings depicting women dressed in exquisite attire within the town's magnificent main square. These paintings by Houel have served as a reliable visual reference for reviving the tradition of recreating the festive Arbëreshë costumes in Palazzo Adriano—a practice maintained from 1998 to the present day. This revival was also supported by the research of Ilaria Parrino, titled "Costumes and Gold in the Culture of Palazzo Adriano" (*Costumi e Ori nella Cultura di Palazzo Adriano*). While the stylistic features and patterns are very similar to those of the costumes from Piana degli Albanesi, the fabrics used—such as brocades, silks, or silk lampas—feature a variety of colors and floral motifs, much like the *pampinja* (floral-patterned fabric) found in Piana degli Albanesi. The Virgin Mary served as the inspiration for the earliest *bresi* (traditional festive garment), dating back to 1710; it is owned by a local family from Palazzo Adriano and bears an image of *Maria Santissima delle Grazie* (Our Lady of Grace).

The Arbëreshë costume of Mezzojuso: a new discovery

Only in recent years has the community of Mezzojuso rediscovered the value of its identity through traditional attire, as a way to demonstrate its Arbëreshë heritage and its connection to the motherland, Albania. This initiative was spearheaded by Salvato Bisulca, who formed a group featuring folk costumes from various regions of Albania; the group now wears these outfits at various events and local religious celebrations.
This interest piqued my curiosity, leading me to ask the group whether they might possess any elements of specifically Arbëreshë origin that could serve as a reference for creating a traditional costume of their own. As it happens, a research project is currently underway—I will share some initial insights here. For some time, there has been talk in Mezzojuso of a "woman in a costume" depicted within a painting of a saint. This figure appears in a painting of Saint Basil the Great, housed in the Church of Maria SS. di Tutte le Grazie (Mary Most Holy of All Graces) at the Basilian Monastery in Mezzojuso. The painting dates back to the early 1700s and has recently undergone restoration. It shows a small figure of a woman ascending toward the monastery, carrying a rosary and a cross; she is in a prayerful, devotional, and processional posture. Her attire resembles the everyday dress previously described in discussions regarding the styles found in Santa Cristina and Piana; however, in this instance, the colors are earthy tones rather than black (perhaps due to the chromatic requirements of the painting), and she wears a double *vantera* (apron) in a light beige shade with a golden border. A particularly notable feature is her head covering, which bears a striking resemblance to the traditional attire found in certain Arbëreshë communities in Calabria.

The Arbëresh costume of Contessa Entellina

The costume from Contessa Entellina is inspired by various items discovered within the homes of the local women.
The outfit shown in the photograph belonged to the great-grandmother of the person wearing it; its construction is very similar to that of the costumes from Piana degli Albanesi and Santa Cristina. A distinctive feature is the vest (*krath*), which, in this version, is a corset that closes at the front—unlike the aforementioned style, which remains open to reveal the V-neck of the chemise. It appears that the women of Contessa Entellina did not continue to produce this particular style, likely due to the high cost of both the materials and the craftsmanship required.

The costume produced in recent years, by contrast, is the purple dress featured in the local mural. It was designed to honor Countess Eleonora d'Aragona and Caterina Cadorna, who governed the Fief of Entella during the 15th and 16th centuries, prior to the arrival of the Albanian (Arbëresh) settlers in the area.

Restoration as a Means to Valorize Tradition

This discussion examines the crucial role of modern textile restoration and preventive conservation techniques—interventions essential for halting the biological and structural degradation of centuries-old artifacts and ensuring their physical stability. Furthermore, the study proposes an operational model for outreach and regional regeneration, centered on the implementation of vocational training courses. These educational programs aim to pass on complex, ancient techniques—such as specialized sewing and gold embroidery—to new generations, thereby rescuing the artistic craftsmanship of the Arbëresh community from the threat of extinction. Ultimately, the research demonstrates how the synergy between rigorous documentation and practical application can transform "woven memory" into a sustainable engine for cultural development, active preservation, and social innovation for the entire linguistic minority.

The restoration of fine gold on fabric—whether in the form of spun gold, gold strips, or embroidery made with pure gold thread on historic composite textiles—is one of the most complex tasks in the field of textile conservation. Given that such objects are composed of multiple materials—combining highly degradable organic fibers, such as silk or velvet, with rigid metallic threads—the modern approach strictly adheres to the principle of minimal conservative intervention.

The goal is almost never to "make the gold shine like new" through invasive re-gilding; rather, the focus is on stabilizing the structure, halting oxidation, and reinforcing the anchor points to the underlying fabric. Mechanical and (selective) chemical cleaning: cleaning gilded embroidery thread is a true art form. The use of harsh chemical liquids or solvents is strictly prohibited, as they could dissolve historical adhesives or cause irreparable staining to the base fabric. Instead, a controlled suction method is employed: surface dust and particles are removed using micro-vacuums with constant airflow, with a fine protective mesh placed over the area to prevent the threads from snagging or tearing. To remove oxidation or accumulated oily grime from the gold threads, conservators use tiny swabs dampened with appropriate volatile solvents (or suitable non-aqueous mixtures), applying them millimeter by millimeter while ensuring that no liquid penetrates the inner textile core of the thread. Traditional cleaning methods—such as rubbing with bicarbonate using a cloth, or applying a warm iron—rely on the fact that while fine gold reacts poorly to cold and moisture, it responds favorably to heat.

Structural Consolidation (Couching): The true core of gold embroidery restoration lies in returning deformed or lifted metallic threads to their original positions through textile anchoring—no glues are used. All detached gold threads are repositioned and secured to the base fabric using tiny, hand-stitched anchor points (techniques derived from couching or canvas stitch). Threads used: Extremely fine silk or cotton threads are employed to create these stable yet invisible securing stitches. Base support: If the underlying fabric is severely damaged or can no longer support the weight of the gold, a reinforcing backing—made of silk or another compatible material—is inserted after being properly treated and stabilized. If this is still insufficient, the gold embroidery is carefully detached and transferred onto a new fabric. This is a highly complex process: the original design must be maintained on the new textile, and the embroidery—having been precisely trimmed—is first basted in place and then secured using the aforementioned invisible stitches. This work is performed on an embroidery frame, just as if it were a new piece of embroidery. Once the gold embroidery has been applied, its perimeter

is outlined with a thread of appropriate thickness to conceal and protect the previously trimmed edge**.**

It is evident from the processes described in this text that they must be carried out with a high degree of manual skill and professionalism; for this reason, training courses are essential—both to learn these techniques and to ensure that such highly precious artistic creations do not fall into oblivion.

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