

Ismail Kadare.

The Three-Arched Bridge. John Hodgson, tr.
New York. Arcade. 1997. 184 pp. ISBN 1-55970-368-7.

At long last, after many years of delay, the novel *The Three-Arched Bridge* has finally appeared in English. It is one of Kadare's classic works of Balkan history and legendry, and counts among his finest novels of the period. The Albanian version, *Ura me tri harqe*, was first published in Tirana in 1978, at about the same time as *Broken April* and *Doruntine*. The attentive reader will not fail to detect parallels and affinities with the latter two works, which have also been translated into English.

With *The Three-Arched Bridge*, Kadare returns to the mythical fountainhead of Albania's haunted history to bring to life one of the most awesome motifs of Balkan legendry, that of immurement. The legend of a human being being walled in during the construction of a bridge or castle is widespread in Albanian oral literature (cf. the tale of Rozafat Castle) and is based no doubt on a reality. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, animals (sheep, goats, chickens) were still being sacrificed on such occasions in Albania and their remains immured to 'stabilize' the foundations of bridges, indeed the practice can still be encountered today.

The novel takes us back to early March in the year of our Lord 1377 in the company of the Monk Gjon. As the first chapter of the book makes it evident, crime is involved in the construction of the new bridge over the Ujana e Keqe (Wicked Waters) river and there is more to the immurement than meets the eye. A fierce dispute has broken out between the constructors and their interest group on the one hand and the local ferry company on the other. This local dispute is woven into a conflict of a much greater dimension, that is soon to be brought about by the invasion of Christian Albania by the invincible hordes of the Ottoman Empire. "The shadows of its minarets are slowly falling over us."

Albania, like Bosnia and Kosovo, has traditionally been a frontier territory between the Christian West and the Islamic East. Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), from the southern Albanian town of Gjirokastër, was raised in this cultural borderland, as was Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić (1892-1975), a Bosnian Serb from Travnik. Indeed, *The Three-Arched Bridge* has been interpreted by some observers as an Albanian reaction to Andrić's best-known novel *Na Drini cuprija*, Sarajevo 1948 (Bridge on the Drina).

Despite its grim background, *The Three-Arched Bridge* makes delightful reading in John Hodgson's fluent translation. It is one of the few works by Kadare to be translated into English directly from the Albanian, i.e. not via the French. Kadare is at his best with Balkan themes and one can only hope that other such works, such as *Kështjella*, Tirana 1970 (The Citadel), *Dimri i madh*, Tirana 1977 (The Great Winter), and *Viti i mbrapshtë*, Tirana 1986 (The Sombre Year), will also soon appear in English translation.

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