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BUTRINT AND COASTAL CHAONIA (SARANDA, ALBANIA)

Enrico Giorgi*, Belisa Muka**, Stefano Medas***, Nadia Aleotti°, Federica Carbotti°, Veronica Castignani°, Francesca D'Ambola°, Giacomo Sigismondo*

The Butrint Project, born in 2015, is a joint research agreement between the University of Bologna and the Archaeological Institute of Tirana developed to investigate the UNESCO World Heritage site of Butrint in southern Albania. Building on the legacy of previous excavations, the project aims to reconstruct the site's historical development using innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches. Early phases of research focused on laser scanning and mapping of the Hellenistic city walls, followed by stratigraphic investigations at the acropolis, where evidence of long-term settlement has been uncovered. Recent research has included the digital documentation and the study of the Sanctuary of Asclepius, as well as underwater explorations of the lagoon to better understand the site's topography and its surrounding landscape. The Project also emphasizes landscape archaeology, examining the broader region of northern coastal Epirus to analyse settlement patterns and socioeconomic factors. Alongside its research, the project promotes public engagement through educational initiatives and exhibitions, highlighting the cultural heritage of the site and its importance within Mediterranean history.

Involved institutions

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation; Ministry of Culture of Albania; Italian Embassy in Tirana; Italian Cultural Institute in Tirana; University of Bologna; Academy of Science of Albania; Archaeological Institute of Tirana; Butrint Management Foundation; Butrinto National Park.

The Butrint Project: aims and research methodology

Research at the UNESCO site of Butrint has developed within a deep-rooted tradition of studies by the University of Bologna in Southern Albania, while also combining the legacy of the Italian Archaeological Mission of the 1930s and Albanian excavations from the 1980s and 1990s. The Butrint Project started in 2015 as part of a broader research agreement between the Univer-

sity of Bologna and the Archaeological Institute of Tirana that aimed at studying the landscape of Northern coastal Epirus and began in 2000 with excavations at *Phoinike*¹. Thanks to the collaboration with the Butrint Archaeological Park and the Butrint Management Foundation, in agreement with the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Culture of Albania, and with the support of the Alma Scavi program of the University of Bologna and the grant for Italian archaeological, anthropological and ethnological missions abroad of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Butrint Project aims at investigating the site and its surrounding area to reconstruct its development over time through innovative methodologies and professionalizing activities.

After an initial phase focused on laser scanning survey and mapping of the decay of the Hellenistic city walls (Benfatti, Castignani, Pizzimenti 2020), following the experience gained by the Bologna team in the *Grande Progetto Pompei* (Giorgi et

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Fig. 1. Laser scanning survey of the Sanctuary of Asclepius

alii 2024a), since 2019 stratigraphic investigations have concentrated on the acropolis hill, where evidence of long-term settlement has been uncovered. More recently, topographic surveys and the analysis of the Sanctuary of Asclepius have begun (fig. 1), along with underwater surveys aimed at expanding knowledge about the site's topography. Investigations at Butrint are part of a broader landscape study extending from the lagoon along the Ionian coast to the Pavla River Valley, reaching the border with Greece. This territorial study has recently been enhanced by the FortNet Project, conducted in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome².

Following significant international projects focused mainly on the Roman and Medieval city of Butrint (Hansen, Hodges, Leppard 2013; Hernandez, Çondi 2018), the Italian and Albanian project has directed its research questions toward largely unexplored areas: the genesis of the first stable settlement, its relationship with the surrounding territory, and the role of the lagoon in the landscape's evolution.

The decision to start excavating the acropolis, where the earliest remains are concentrated, also responds to the need to refresh the conventional method of studying Epirote fortifications. Traditionally, this approach has relied mainly on historical analysis and the study of construction techniques, without the support of stratigraphic evidence.

From a methodological standpoint, the Project emerged during a phase of profound innovation in

digital documentation techniques, accelerated by pilot research conducted by the same team within the *Piano della Conoscenza* of the *Grande Progetto Pompei* and at the *Paestum Archaeological Park*³. This approach has led to a particular focus on terrestrial and aerial proximity scanning systems, based on the simultaneous use of laser scanners and UAVs, not only for surveying architectural complexes but also for 3D documentation of excavation contexts. In artifact study, there has been a gradual shift in focus from artifacts to ecofacts, alongside the development of paleo-environmental studies. Thanks to key collaborations⁴, the Butrint Project aims to promote this research trend, which is crucial for understanding the complex and dynamic lagoon landscape. Ceramic studies, meanwhile, have focused on analysing the relationships between artifacts within stratigraphic contexts, thanks to existing reference studies within the Italo-Albanian collaboration (Gamberini 2016; Aleotti 2022; Aleotti *et alii* 2022).

Research continues alongside public engagement activities, which aim to actively contribute to raising awareness of the region's cultural heritage. These include knowledge transfer occasions, open days for local schools in Butrint, and professional training for the Park staff⁵. In 2024, these initiatives were given a significant increase by the "Butrint Cento" program, designed to commemorate the centenary of Italian research in Albania. Among the events, the re-release of the volume *Butrinto. Il Mito di Enea. Gli scavi*, written by Luigi Maria Ugolini and edited by the Butrint Project and the Italian Institute of Culture was addressed to a non-specialist audience to recall the site's re-discovery in 1924. A conference was held in Bertinoro (FC), Ugolini's birthplace, alongside the opening of an exhibition of historical images and activities in local schools. A second exhibition of period objects, including some of Ugolini's belongings and the paper squeezes of inscriptions by the epigraphist Luigi Morricone, took place in Bologna during the international scientific conference concluding the programme of events⁶.

² PRIN 2022 FortNet Project (Unione Europea – Next Generation EU, Missione 4 Componente 2, CUP J53D23000100006). Website: <https://site.unibo.it/fort-netproject/en>.

³ See the website of the Tolomeo Laboratory - Unibo (<https://site.unibo.it/tolomeolab/it>). For example, see Gagnani, Gaucchi 2017 and Toniolo, Bergami, Silani 2019.

⁴ Collaboration with the ArcheoLaBio Research Center – Unibo (Fiori 2023) and with Laura Sadori from the Department of Environmental Biology - Sapienza University of Rome.

⁵ <https://site.unibo.it/butrint/en/third-mission>.

⁶ The Bologna exhibition was made possible thanks to the



Fig. 2. The promontory of Butrint with the island of Corfù in the background.

Butrint: History of a UNESCO site between Archaeology and Cultural Policy

The site of Butrint is located on a promontory overlooking the eponymous lagoon at the end of the Ksamil peninsula in Southern Albania, separated by a small strait from the island of Corfu (fig. 2). The myth of its foundation by the Trojan Helenus and Andromache, deported to Epirus by Neoptolemus, crystallized during the Augustan period in versions of Aeneas' journey told by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Virgil, but it elaborates on older and more complex traditions, probably linked to the routes taken by Greek mer-

chants travelling to the West who, at least since ancient times, found a safe haven on the nearby island of Corcyra (Giorgi, Muka 2023).

Due to its strategic location between Greece and the West, the site has been inhabited since the Bronze Age by seasonal herding communities. However, it was during the Archaic period that a first stable settlement emerged, perhaps as an emporium dominated by a sanctuary founded by Greek colonists from Corcyra (Hernandez 2017: 260-261). The civil war among the Corcyrean factions involved Butrint and marks a break in the site's history, clearly visible in the drastic decline of Classical archaeological evidence (Aleotti 2022). With the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Butrint resurges as a religious, political, and administrative centre around the Sanctuary of Asclepius, first within the Epirote League and then in the *koinon* of the *Prasaboi*. Following the Roman conquest, notable figures like Atticus settled in the area, and the *Colonia Augusta Butthrotum* witnessed urban and monumental development, especially

collaboration with the Department of Cultural Heritage - Unibo, which provided the objects from the Ugolini donation, and with the Chair of Epigraphy at the University of Macerata for the paper squeezes. For the "Butrinto Cento" program, see <https://site.unibo.it/butrint/en/butrinto-100>.

thanks to the Flavian expansion in the adjacent Vrina plain (Greenslade 2019).

Prominent members of the equestrian order with specific economic interests in the area were also the *Synepirotae*, protagonists of the second book of Varro's *De re rustica*. The importance of Epirus and Butrint in the ideology of the victory at Actium was further enhanced by the direct involvement of Octavian's *entourage*, as evidenced by the patronage of the colony by Atticus and then by Agrippa, the latter also portrayed in a series of statues celebrating the imperial family. These figures are the interpreters of an ideology that establishes an instrumental link between literature and politics, a recurring theme in the history of the site (Deniaux 2023).

In Late Antiquity Butrint became an episcopal see, but during the late Medieval period, it began a phase of gradual abandonment. Despite the fortifications being reinforced during the Venetian rule, in its final phases, Butrint was primarily occupied by a military garrison to control the Corfu Channel and exploit the profitable fish farms (Giorgi, Carbotti, Sigismondo 2024).

In 1924 the site, surrounded by swamps, was rediscovered by Ugolini. At that time, archaeological research at Butrint served to culturally justify Italy's presence in the country, warranting the importance of financial support and media attention given by the Italian authorities to the discoveries. After the interruption caused by World War II, the archaeology of Butrint was again instrumentalized by the emerging socialist regime, with renewed excavations in the final two decades of the last century. The connection between the ruins and the natural environment led to Butrint's inclusion as a UNESCO site in 1992, recognizing its significant value as a testimony to the history of the Mediterranean.

Recent Archaeological Discoveries

The acropolis of Butrint is organized across three terraces. The middle terrace, bordered on the lower side by an imposing polygonal wall over which the Medieval fortification was built, contains structures buried under a rich stratigraphic sequence. Some excavation trenches were opened in this area of the plateau in the last century (Hansen, Hodges, Leppard 2013; Rivoli *et alii* 2022), but these investigations did not lead to definitive results and were never systematically published. Investigations were therefore resumed in this part of the acropolis with the aim of iden-



Fig. 3. The Butrint Project excavations on the acropolis.

tifying intact stratigraphic deposits (fig. 3). Given these premises, the challenges of investigating a partially excavated context, inhabited from the Bronze Age to the Venetian period and covered by dense forest, become clear.

The challenge accepted by the Butrint Project has led to the identification of a portion of the wall's filling sealed by a later use layer. The finds, including some fragments of Corinthian pottery dating to the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE, allow for the stratigraphic dating of the walls to the Archaic period. Additionally, the discovery in a similar context of a deposit of sling shots suggests a possible ritual foundation of the walls, which also served as the acropolis' *peribolos* (fig. 4). The type of finds, characteristic of sanctuary area, as the handle of a bucchero vessel, along with other clues such as the recognition of a stone opening of a *bothros* in which Domenico Mustilli found an inscription interpreted as a dedication to Athena, would confirm a sacred function for the Archaic acropolis (Giorgi 2022; Giorgi, Muka 2023).

As with other areas of the site, the stratigraphy shows substantial abandonment of the area during the late Classical period. After this break, the stratigraphic deposits are characterized by a material culture that no longer refers to the Corinthian-Corcyrean colonial world, but rather reflects the production and trade that occurred in Hellenistic Epirus first and then in Roman Epirus. The acropolis excavations have thus not only clarified the site's genesis but have also revealed a complex evolution and a material culture that seems to testify to communities that initially looked towards the Greek route to the West, then towards



Fig. 4. Acropolis fortification walls in Butrint.

(Giorgi *et alii* 2024b)⁷. Considering the substantial data already obtained, future work will focus on enhancing surveys of the hill using LiDAR sensors and exploring the lagoon.

Landscape Archaeology in Southern Albania: Challenges of Upland Archaeology in Epirus

The field research focused on several sites in the Valona district, along the coastal strip between Porto Palermo Bay to the north and the



Fig. 5. The site of Malathre in the Pavlla river valley.

the inland areas and finally towards the broader Hellenistic-Roman koine.

The second line of research has led the Italo-Albanian team to engage with the lagoon environment. In this context, although paleo-environmental analyses are ongoing, underwater surveys have already yielded significant results, allowing the identification of the submerged remains of the Roman bridge piers and the recognition of the Pelode harbour mentioned by Strabo and Ptolemy

Greek-Albanian border to the south. Interest in landscape archaeology was already a key aspect of the SITARC Project (Giorgi, Bogdani 2012). More recently, there has been the need to revisit the area due to the rapid urbanization of the coast and the development of mass tourism, which have

⁷ Underwater investigations were possible thanks to the collaboration with the company Idra s.r.l. of Venice.



Fig. 6. The hillfort of Karos (Valona district).

radically altered the contemporary landscape. Additionally, documentation and geospatial analysis technologies have been significantly enhanced, prompting an update of the archaeological map (Carbotti *et alii* 2024; Carbotti *et alii* 2025). The research focuses on several smaller centres from a diachronic perspective, from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, to analyse the dynamics of settlement and the socio-economic structure of the region (fig. 5). These hilltop sites have long characterized the Epirus landscape, while centres with greater urban development have experienced alternating fortunes.

Epirus has a predominantly mountainous morphology, with rugged ridges reaching the coast. The impact of environmental factors on ancient settlement has significant implications for the study of these areas, and working in mountainous environment requires considering its specific peculiarities. The presence of irregular high-elevation surfaces, often difficult to access, and rocky and steep slopes influence fieldwork methods, as

well as the quantity and quality of the data collected. Erosion processes and sparse tree cover sometimes facilitate the dispersal of archaeological deposits. In other cases, dense shrub vegetation hinders systematic surface collection, making intensive surveys challenging (fig. 6).

Defining representative models of ancient occupation is therefore a particularly complex task that requires an integrated, multi-scale approach, adaptable to the specificities of each context. A combined methodology has been adopted to better understand the ancient landscape, which includes targeted surveys, multiple topographic surveying techniques, the use of remotely sensed data, as well as historical and modern cartography and aerial photography.

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ge at the Ravenna Campus and with IDRA s.r.l. of Venice for underwater investigations, with the Department of Environmental Biology at Sapienza University of Rome for paleo-environmental studies, with the Department of Humanities at the University of Macerata for epigraphic studies, with the Museum of Roman Civilization for archival research, and with the Municipality of Bertinoro for public engagement and knowledge dissemination activities in the “Butrint Cento” events program.

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