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PHOINIKE. ARCHAEOLOGY OF A BORDER CITY

Giuseppe Lepore*, Belisa Muka**

The city of Phoinike, located in the region of Caonia in Northern Epirus (present-day Albania), serves as an excellent case study for analyzing numerous historical, territorial, and urban dynamics that continue to characterize the Balkan world today. Excavations conducted by the University of Bologna and Institute of Archaeology in Tirana over the past 26 years have revealed a city that was continuously inhabited from the late Classical period through the late Middle Ages, encompassing all major historical phases. Notably, Phoinike later became a military site during the communist regime of Enver Hoxha – an unexpected factor that contributed to its preservation.

The Italian-Albanian Archaeological Mission at *Phoinike* was established with a dual purpose: from a more political perspective, it continues a tradition of research, particularly Italian and Bolognese, in the Balkans, as the first excavation mission was conducted between 1926 and 1927 by the Romagnol archaeologist Luigi Maria Ugolini (who graduated at the University of Bologna with a thesis on prehistoric archaeology¹), always with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic² (fig. 1).

From the perspective of scientific research, the Mission is part of one of the most promising areas of study in modern Classical Archaeology, namely the so-called “Archaeology of the City”. *Phoinike* is located in a region “lacking cities” (κατὰ νόμας,



Fig. 1. Luigi Maria Ugolini at *Phoinike* in 1926 (Archive of the Archaeological Mission to *Phoinike*).

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** Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë - Tirana.

¹ The thesis, titled *La stipe votiva della Panighina (Bertinoro)/ The Votive Deposit of Panighina (Bertinoro)*, was initially conducted under the supervision of Gherardo Ghirardini, a professor of Umbro-Etrusco-Gallic antiquities, and later under the guidance of Pericle Ducati, who took over Ghirardini's position in 1920 following the latter's death, becoming the Chair of Archaeology at the University of Bologna.

² For the history of the Archaeological Mission at Phoinike, reference should be made to De Maria 2016 and Car-

Thuc. II, 80, 5), such as northern Epirus (present-day Albania), which marks a border between Illyria to the north and the Greek world to the south. Here, urbanisation arrived late, only from the mid-4th century BC (while Greek poleis generally began their structuring in archaeologically visible forms from at least the 8th century BC) (fig. 2).

This is, therefore, a unique territory, inclined towards a pastoral economy and, consequently, characterised by marked nomadism, which certainly did not favour the emergence of stable urban centres. In this sense, the primary aim of our re-

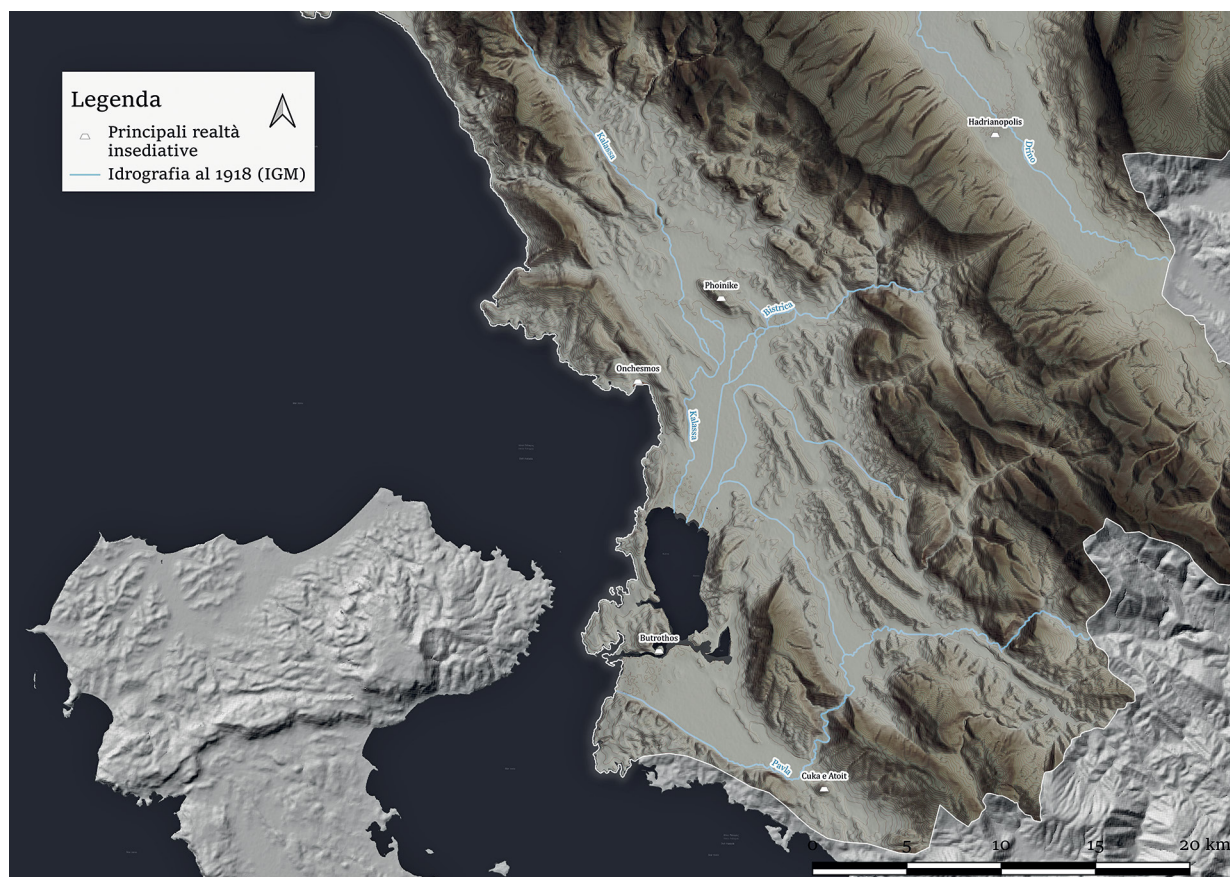


Fig. 2. Map of ancient region of Caonia (designed by Vittorio Mirto).

search is to define and explain the genesis of urban form and its development over time (the city will continue to thrive uninterrupted until the arrival of the Turks in the 16th century AD³). Naturally, these two main objectives are connected to other aspects that have always been part of the spirit of the Mission: teaching and training young Italian and Albanian archaeologists, conservation and restoration of archaeological structures and artefacts uncovered during the excavations (Ugolini himself was involved in the restoration and arrangement of structures), and, lastly communication and dissemination of the results achieved.

Given these premises, the methodology employed aims to balance the traditional study and analysis of the archaeological context with the most modern methods of surveying and representation, always with great attention to the broader context and the overall view. Thus, the analytical study of material culture and the manual survey-

ing of structures have been combined with drone surveying of the entire hill and the use of non-invasive investigations for the study of structures still buried (fig. 3).

Results and Perspectives

After 25 years of research, the picture of the city and its surrounding area is beginning to become quite clear: the centre, designed and structured on a hill that controls a landscape dominated by water (at least three rivers flow through the plain below), plays a central role in a large territory situated between the coast opposite the island of Corfu and the hills that separate it from the valleys behind (the valley of the Drinos River) (fig. 4).

The city was connected to, and perhaps controlled another centre on the coast, a true harbour: this is *Onchesmos* (present-day Saranda), often mentioned in written sources within the well-established “Trojan mythology” in these regions (think of nearby Butrint, explicitly mentioned in Virgil’s *Aeneid*), which has revealed extensive remains

rieri 2024.

³ On the subject of nomadism and marginality, see Lepore

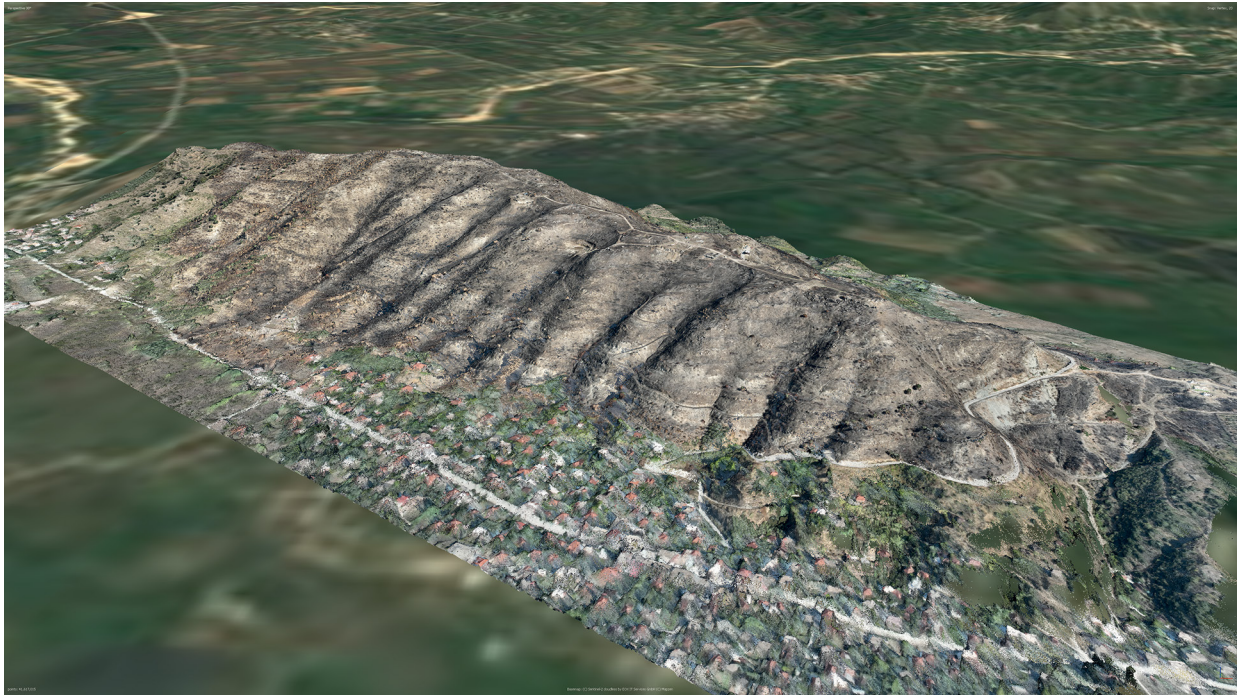


Fig. 3. Digital model of the hill of *Phoinike* (prepared by Vittorio Mirto)



Fig. 4. View from the South of the hill of *Phoinike* (Archive of the Archaeological Mission to *Phoinike*).

from its late antiquity and medieval phases⁴. The public areas of the city are arranged along a long

narrow strip corresponding to the top of the hill, while the residential areas are located on terraces purposely created on the southern and, in part, on the eastern side. The entire settlement system, therefore, is artificial and required significant hu-

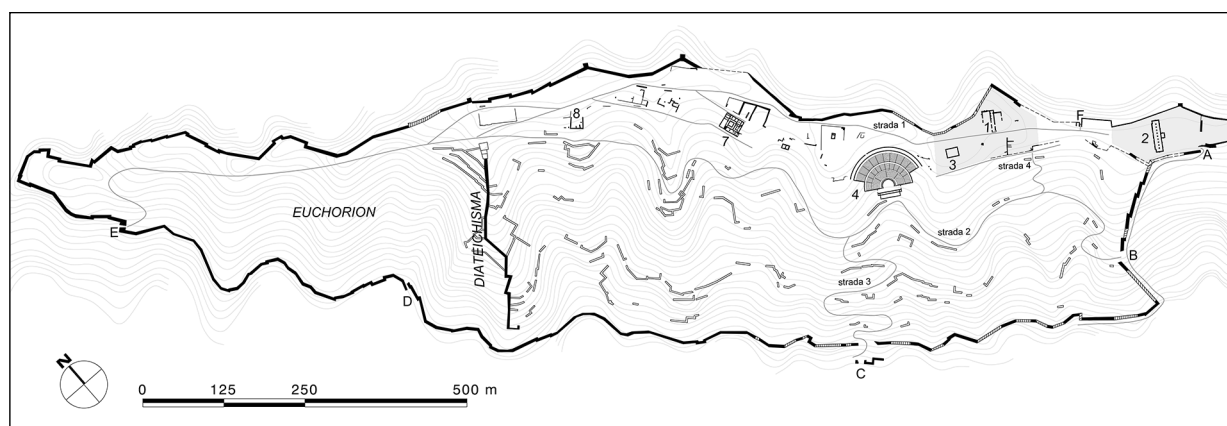


Fig. 5. General plan of the archaeological area (Archive of the Archaeological Mission to *Phoinike*).

man intervention to make these spaces usable (fig. 5).

The presence of numerous freshwater springs (some of which are still recognisable today) made human settlement possible, with the oldest traces dating back to the early Bronze Age⁵. The presence of only three access routes to the hill makes the site protected and easily defensible: the first road ascends from the northern slope, the second from the southern slope, and the third from the western tip of the hill. The earliest phase we can trace dates back to the mid-4th century BC and is located at the easternmost end of the hill: unfortunately, the state of preservation in this sector is not optimal (it is precisely at this point that a military observation post was located), but the entire sector is surrounded by a curtain wall of large stone blocks, which is not found in other parts of the city. The few written sources and the data from the oldest tombs in the southern necropolis confirm the proposed chronology: it is likely that the original kome was located here, which may also have been connected to a cultic site (or other structure), indicated by the presence of a few but significant fragments of imported decorated pottery (mostly Attic) dating from the end of the 6th to the 5th century BC⁶.

Between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC, the phase of maximum urban development of the city occurred: a new city wall (this time a double curtain with *emplecton*) expanded the city westward and southward,

encompassing the entire hill, while a new public area, recently identified as the *nea agora*, was created to distinguish it from the *archaia agora* located in the eastern sector of the upper city⁷. In this new space, several public buildings were arranged, including a meeting hall, a stoa with an exedra (the former *thesauros*), and an open space with a monumental staircase. During this phase, the southern plain was also restructured, undergoing extensive drainage, with the new necropolis being established there, which was fully published in recent years⁸.

In Roman times, the city entered a new phase of expansion, not clearly evident in previous research, but now at the centre of new and highly significant discoveries: the entire southern terrace of the *nea agora* is, in fact, occupied by a huge complex dating from the early imperial period, built on successive terraces with a building technique that betrays the direct arrival of craftsmen from Rome (fig. 6).

This mixed construction, characterised by *opus incertum* and courses of bricks or slabs of white limestone, defines the entire Augustan phase of the city (and the nearby Butrint), demonstrating Augustus' intervention in these territories following his victory at *Actium*⁹. Little can still be said about the complex under excavation: certainly, the recent discovery of a portion of a marble statue resembling Isis leads us to several interpretations (fig. 7).

⁴ On *Onchesmos*/Saranda, refer to Mirto 2024.

⁵ Ugolini already found several stone axes: Ugolini 1932: 140-142. Recently, other objects related to this earliest occupation of the hill have been discovered, and they are currently under study.

⁶ See Baldoni 2024.

⁷ The definition was introduced in Lepore 2020.

⁸ Lepore, Muka 2018.

⁹ For building techniques in Phoinike, refer to Benfatti,



Fig. 6. Overview of the large terraced Roman-era building (Archive of the Archaeological Mission to *Phoinike*).

The statue, headless, was found in secondary position within a restoration of the complex carried out in the Justinian era: we cannot, therefore, say whether it represents Isis, a priestess, or another figure dressed in the Isis style. However, it is possible that the complex might represent a building dedicated to imperial cult, containing statues of other members of the imperial family with their consorts, who could also adopt this kind of “mythical disguise”¹⁰.

The diachronic perspective adopted by the Mission also encompasses the late antique and medieval city: before the reconstruction carried out in Justinian era, a great earthquake (possibly that of AD 358) destroyed much of the ancient monuments: archaeological evidence for this is provided by the collapse – still in situ – of structures from the Roman complex, which were not removed but rather built upon¹¹ (fig. 8).

It is with the 6th century AD that the city changes appearance and transforms into a “new” Christian *Phoinike*. The cornerstones of this phase are, of course, the churches: a large basilica occupies the empty space of the *nea agora*, using the exedra of the old stoa as a baptistery. A dense settlement spreads around, reusing previous structures, and a large complex, possibly interpreted as a bishop’s palace, is also constructed¹². In the eastern sector of the city, there are significant traces of Christian presence: a second church is built on the ruins of



Fig. 7. Fragment of a statue with Isiac dress (Archive of the Archaeological Mission to *Phoinike*).

the large Hellenistic stoa, which is completely decommissioned and used as a burial space¹³. Once again, the church building leads to the creation of a settlement around it, which appears to form a polycentric city, as often happens in such cases. Written sources attribute this new phase of construction to Justinian, who is said to have moved the city from the valley floor, which was once again marshy and unsuitable for settlement, to the top of the hill¹⁴. The new data at our disposal appears to confirm this chronological framework, placing all these building interventions between the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

In summary, the city of *Phoinike* provides an excellent vantage point for the analysis of numerous historical, territorial, and urban dynamics that are still highly relevant today. In fact, this territory is now called *Chamria* as a evidence of a highly contested borderland, most recently between Greece and Albania until very recent times. In summary, these constitute the chronological phases and the

Patrignani 2024.

¹⁰ A preliminary report on the statue can be found in Lepore, Muka 2024 and Maikidou-Poutrinou 2024.

¹¹ Benfatti 2024 A.

¹² See Cirelli 2024 and Benfatti 2024, with previous bibliog-

raphy.

¹³ For the *stoa*, refer to Rinaldi 2024 and D’Aprile, Leone 2024.

history of a territory and a city which offer the basis for a rigorous and comprehensive diachronic analysis, an endeavour that the Italian-Albanian Archaeological Mission at *Phoinike* intends to pursue for many years to come.

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