

The walled town of Dyrrachium (Durrës): settlement and dynamics

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Introduction

Durrës (at various times in the past known as Epidamnus, Dyrrachium and Dyrrachion) lies on the Adriatic coast of Albania, c.35 km west of Tirana. The town has been continuously occupied, in some form or other, at least since the Archaic Greek period. Today it presents itself to the modern traveller arriving across the Adriatic as a busy and rapidly changing port. The relationship of the town with the sea has shaped its urban dynamic in ways which, as yet, are imperfectly understood. Modern Durrës lies at the S tip of a peninsula c.10 km in length. The land to the northwest of the town is hilly, and this terrain extends as far as the ancient remains known as Porto Romano, c.7 km north of the town. The land northeast of the town is flat and low-lying, currently arable farmland criss-crossed by small irrigation canals (fig. 1). It was drained and reclaimed from marshland under the Communist régime. The overall impression of the topography around Durrës (fig. 2) is that the area of high ground had once been an island, detached from the mainland or joined only by a sandbar, and that this relationship has fluctuated over time as a result of small seismic shifts, rising sea levels, and other factors. Any understanding of the town over time has to be placed against as accurate as possible an understanding of these and other features of what is a rapidly changing environment.

Before we present our archaeological investigations, it may be useful to outline the character of the modern town and the conditions under which our initial assessments took place. The current social and economic climate is one of development. A first-time visitor has the impression of a multitude of new buildings in various stages of completion. This will increase dramatically over the next few years since the European Union has now agreed that the Trans-Balkan superhighway, known as Corridor Eight, will begin at Durrës before heading east.¹ It will vastly increase the amount of traffic as it makes Durrës the start of one of the principal routes from the Adriatic coast into central Europe and Turkey. This is not the place to discuss Albanian planning laws; suffice it to say that the archaeological fabric of the town is under severe threat and will continue to be unless a proactive stance is taken by archaeologists in general, and those from the west in particular, in trying to tackle the problems and damage caused by "illegal" construction projects (fig. 3).

This paper summarises work conducted in Durrës and Tirana in July-August 2000, with the aid of grant from the Packard Humanities Institute which is undertaking a number of archaeological projects in Albania. The general focus of the Packard Institute is on the current condition of archaeological remains in the country, with a view to the preservation (and, where necessary, the excavation) of a heritage under the threat of destruction. In relation to Durrës, the relatively modest tasks that we set ourselves were an assessment of the standing remains and a consideration of the viability of a future excavation. The concept of Durrës as a *mobile* settlement is one particular issue that emerged.

Surviving remains other than the town walls

Before we attempt to view the settlement of ancient Durrës holistically, we should provide some background on the Roman and late-antique town, as we can distinguish it at present.

Cemeteries

Broadly, the areas used for burial, marked on fig. 4 by hatched areas, are two: to the north of the main

1 The planning and construction of the super-highway by the European Union makes conscious reference to the Roman road-system which started from Rome to Brindisi in the form of the Via Appia and continued as the Via Egnatia from Durrës eastwards to Constantinople.