

An amphitheatre and its afterlives: survey and excavation in the Durres amphitheatre

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Introduction

Dyrrachium (modern Durres) lay at a true ancient crossroads. An important Adriatic port and one of the western termini of the Via Egnatia, it served as a nodal point binding Italy to the Balkans and Greece to Dalmatia. Yet despite its strategic importance, very little is known of its ancient fabric. A handful of textual sources, a tiny epigraphic corpus and a small number of known monuments provide only a vague impression of the Roman city.

One exception is the amphitheatre, one of the few standing structures and an important example of the building type (fig. 1). Extraordinarily well preserved, its general outlines were revealed by sporadic excavations over three decades. Those excavations also uncovered its most unusual feature, an array of post-Roman features. Both the massive necropolis discovered in the arena floor and two Christian chapels, decorated with wall-mosaics and frescoes, that were built into the amphitheatre's galleries, bear witness to its conversion into a locus of Christian memory. However, its careful investigation by Albanian teams did not result in full publication; an accurate plan of the amphitheatre and the features it contained was lacking, and the date of its construction and despoliation remained unknown.

Loss and rediscovery: a brief history of the excavations

Most Roman amphitheatres in continuously occupied cities were utilized into modern times (e.g., Arles), or were rediscovered and excavated in the 19th or early 20th c. (e.g., Pola and Mérida). Durres was different: no ancient source attests to its existence, and it made its only appearance in the annals of history in 1501, when Marinus Barletius penned a brief description of the city and its monuments.¹ It then vanished beneath an accretion of Ottoman houses, invisible even to the probing eyes of Sir Arthur Evans, who went to Durres in 1877 with a copy of Barletius in hand.² Yet L. Heuzey's map and aerial photographs of World War II clearly reveal its oval outline in the arrangement of houses and surrounding streets, a pattern still visible from atop the adjacent hillside.³ Nonetheless, it was not until May 1966 that local archaeologist V. Toçi rediscovered the amphitheatre and initiated its excavation.

Toçi carried out excavations here for nearly two decades, removing over a dozen modern and Ottoman houses from in and around it, and uncovered all of the now-visible *cavea* and most of the galleries on the W side. He also revealed the larger of the two Christian chapels (Chapel 1) with its mosaics and frescoes, as well as a large necropolis in the arena⁴ (fig. 2). The excavations were resumed from 1983 to 2000 by L. Miraj; with the assistance of NATO troops based nearby, she revealed a large section of its NE side, including the monumental N entrance. She also uncovered a second Christian chapel (Chapel 2) and its frescoes.⁵

1 M. Barletius (transl. Z. I. Gentelman), *The historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albanie* (London 1596) 498.

2 A. Evans, *Illyrian letters* (London 1878) 136.

3 L. Heuzey and H. Daumet, *Mission archéologique de Macédoine* (Paris 1876) vol. II, pl. H; Keele Univ. Air Photo Archive, PR/JB 32-S-256-4061, Sept. 6, 1944, 1 : 10,000.

4 V. Toçi, "Amfiteatri i Dyrrahit," *Monumentet* 2 (1971) 37-42; id., "Amfiteatri i Durrësit," *Monumentet* (1975) 42-46; H. Blaca, "Durrës – Amfiteatër," *Iliria* 2 (1967) 262-63; id., "Tipare odontologjike nga materiali skeletor i varrozës së amfiteatrit të Durrësit," *Iliria* 1 (1958) 242-47; A. Hoti, "Një thesar me monedha të aleksit i konnën nga Durrësi," *Iliria* 1994, 1-2; id., "Some features of the early medieval pottery in Albania (7th-11th centuries)," forthcoming. See also K. Mino, *Amfiteatri i Durrësit: dhe raportet urbanistike me qytetin bashkëkohës* (Tirana 1984).

5 L. Miraj, "Amfiteatri i Durrësit," *Iliria* 2 (1986) 151-69; ead., "Gërmime në amfiteatrin e Durrësit," *Iliria* 2 (1988) 264-65; ead., "Gërmime të vitit 1989 në amfiteatër," *Iliria* 2 (1989) 286-87; ead., "Durrës (Amfiteatër e Terma)," *Iliria* 2 (1990) 258-59; ead., "Durazzo. Anfiteatro e città moderna," *Eutopia* 1991-92, 107-13; M. Zeqo, "Durrës – Amfiteatër," *Iliria* 2 (1987) 263-64.