

The Roman forum at Butrint (Epirus) and its development from Hellenistic to mediaeval times

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Butrint (*Buthrotum*, *Bouthrotos*) lies on a headland (area c.16 ha) at the mouth of a lagoon (Lake Butrint) that is linked to the Ionian Sea via a short navigable waterway, the Vivari Channel (fig. 1). Occupying a favorable position on the rugged Epirote coast, Butrint prospered as a seaport on the E-W maritime trade routes. In 1928, the Italian Archaeological Mission, directed by L. M. Ugolini, began excavations, revealing the Hellenistic theater and other monuments surrounding the sanctuary of Asclepius.¹ His excavations, sponsored by the Italian government, sought to promote a relationship between ancient Rome and Butrint based upon Aeneas' legendary visit to the latter, which is described as a 'parva Troia' in the *Aeneid*, and on the material culture related to the Roman colony of *Buthrotum*.² One of our project goals was to re-assess the archaeology of the urban center, following almost 70 years of intermittent excavations, by recovering a diachronic stratified depositional sequence to elucidate the Hellenistic, Roman, and mediaeval phases of urbanization. Because little was known about the archaeology and topography of the Roman colony, we sought to locate the Roman forum, which the Butrint Foundation hypothesized fronted the tripartite building near the theater (fig. 2).³ The excavations (2004-7) have recovered an extensive archaeological record. Although the results are still preliminary, they imply a significant re-assessment of the chronology and topography of Hellenistic and Roman Butrint. The first part of this article re-examines the Hellenistic monuments of the urban center in light of the present excavations. We propose a new phasing scheme and consider historical factors that may have contributed to the urban transformation of Hellenistic Butrint. The second part explores the archaeology and topography of the Roman forum and its associated buildings. We discuss the construction of the forum in relation to the Roman colony and trace the forum's development and eventual abandonment.



Fig. 1. Butrint and its region.

The topography and chronology of the Hellenistic sanctuary of Asclepius (fig. 3)

The theater has been thought to date either to the 4th or 3rd c. B.C.⁴ Following Ugolini, scholars have also assigned an early date (between the 4th and 3rd c. B.C.) to the temple above

1 Ugolini 1935; 1937; 1942; 2003.

2 Verg., *Aen.* 3.292-505; *Ov., Met.* 13.719-23; Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* 1.51. See Hansen 2007, 44-61; Gilkes 2003a, 15-18; Bowden 2003, 28. For Ugolini's finds related to the Roman colony, see Bergemann 1998.

3 Hodges *et al.* 1997, 215-16; Martin 2004, 86-87. For an overview of Butrint, see Hodges 2006.

4 Ugolini (1937, 135) dated the theater to a "periodo classico", which is thought to refer to the 4th c. B.C. Budina (1988, 71) and Wilkes (2003, 166) propose a date in the 3rd c. B.C.