

Late-antique and Byzantine Butrint: interim report on the port and its hinterland (1994-95)

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Introduction

Butrint is an abandoned ancient and mediaeval port, 3 km inland from the Straits of Corfu in S Albania (fig. 1). It occupies a hill on a bend in the Vivari channel, which connects the Straits to the large inland lagoon of Lake Butrint. A narrow plain, formerly a marsh, separates the channel from a band of hills to the south, along which runs the frontier between Albania and Greece. Immediately east of Lake Butrint, a range of hills and low mountains rise up to 824 m, effectively creating a basin around the ancient city and the inland lake.

The early-Byzantine walled city of Butrint covers an area of c.16 hectares (fig. 2). It is likely, however, that at times in its history the city extended over a greater area, encompassing a large expanse of land on the opposite side of the Vivari channel. There are two main parts to the site: the acropolis and the lower city. The acropolis is a long hill that rises up to 42 m asl at its E end, its steep sides accentuated by a circuit of walls which separate it from the natural and artificial terraces gathered around the flanks of the hill. The lower city occupies the lower-lying contours down to the edge of the Vivari channel. Remains of a cemetery are recorded on the spine of hill running W from the acropolis (Ugolini 1937: 174) but its extent is unknown. The most obvious monument outside the city walls, on the opposite side of the channel, is the triangular fortress, which by early modern times became the nucleus of the latest settlement (Leake 1835: 95; Karaiskaj 1980: 33-35). Beyond the fortress to the east, there are substantial remains of late Republican to Byzantine date.

Ciriaco d'Ancona was the first antiquarian to take an interest in the site. The Renaissance collector paused here in 1435, and recorded two inscriptions which he quite probably removed (Ugolini 1942: 223), as well as drawing sketches of the ruins (E. W. Bodnar: pers. comm.). Many subsequent visitors mention the port, but the first major description of Butrint's topography is by Colonel Martin Leake who visited Butrint in 1805. Leake arrived by boat from Saranda, and reports on having some difficulty entering the Vivari channel because a sand bar lay across the mouth of the river. He mentions the fishermen occupying the dwellings gathered around the triangular fortress, and then describes the ancient ruins (Leake 1835: 95-101). It was perhaps Leake's description that led to the arrival of the Italian mission directed by Count Luigi Maria Ugolini in the 1920's. Ugolini's mission was sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the specific request of Mussolini (Petricioli 1990: 268-74). The ministry was concerned to enlarge Italian political influence over the fledgling state of Albania, and, alarmed by the presence of a French archaeological mission at nearby Apollonia, selected the young fascist prehistorian Ugolini to make a survey of the country's archaeology (Petricioli 1990: 274). Ugolini made a journey through Albania in 1924, ending up at Butrint (Ugolini 1927: 153-54). For the focus of his initial operations, he chose the Illyrian and Epirot hilltop site of Foinike, which lies 20 km north of Butrint, beyond the present limits of Lake Butrint (fig. 3). In his four seasons at Foinike, Ugolini excavated the archaic "treasury", a series of Roman cisterns, and a Byzantine basilica, as well as recording standing Roman remains within the village at the foot of the hill (Ugolini 1932).

In 1928, Ugolini moved his operations to Butrint, and launched a colossal campaign of excavations on and around what was, at that time, a bare, unwooded hill. Ugolini was explicit in his intentions: according to Virgil III, it was at Butrint that Aeneas had stopped before sailing on to Italy to found Rome, and Ugolini therefore wished to tighten "the spiritual chains between Rome and Butrint" (Petricioli 1990: 284; cf. Ugolini 1937: 12). Between 1928 and 1940 the mission carried out a great campaign of excavations, which increasingly became entangled in the complicated relations between Albania and Italy. The investigations were curbed by Ugolini's early death in 1936 at the age of 41, although the Italian mission continued on a slightly reduced scale under his successors Marconi and Mustilli. The excavations remain only partially published, the projected 5 volumes of *Albania antica* being eventually reduced to 3, with the theatre and baptistry excavations appearing in a somewhat abridged form as *Il mito d'Enea. Gli scavi* in 1937 as well as