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Institute of Archaeology

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THE FORMATION OF BUTRINT: NEW INSIGHTS FROM EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROMAN FORUM

David R. HERNANDEZ and Dhimitër ÇONDI

This report discusses the preliminary results of archaeological research conducted in the ancient urban center of Butrint (*Bouthrotos; Buthrotum*)¹. The first phase of the project (2004-2007) led to the discovery of the Roman forum and revealed its buildings on the western side of the complex (Fig. 1)². The northwestern corner of the forum pavement was discovered in 2005 in

front of the Tripartite Building, which is located adjacent to the Theater and Sanctuary of Asclepius (Fig. 2). The excavations showed that the forum was constructed in the Augustan period, during the building program associated with the Roman colonization of the city. Two major phases of urban development were identified during the Hellenistic period. In particular, the discovery of a colonnaded

Ancient Urban Center of Butrint

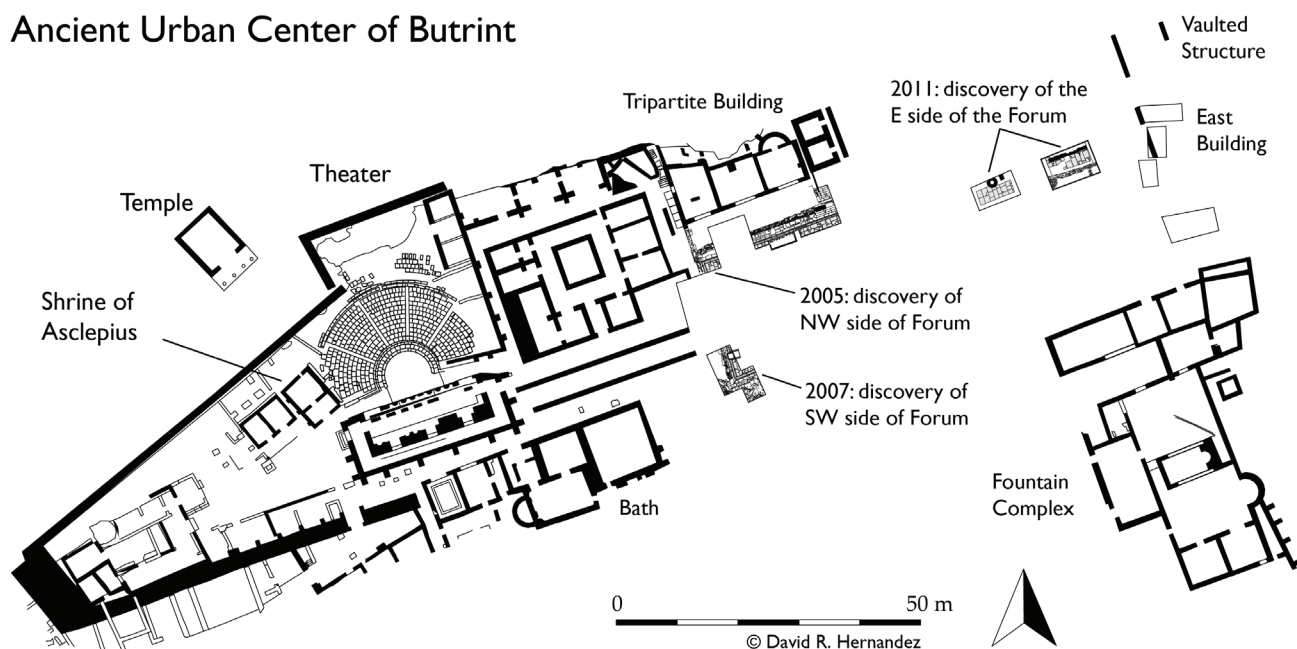


Fig. 1. Plan of the ancient urban centre of Butrint.



Fig. 2. Northwestern corner of the Roman forum, discovered in 2005 (Area 11).

public building (South Stoa) suggested that the *agora* of the Epirote city was located directly beneath the forum³. An achievement of these excavations was the integration of the forum with the adjacent western complex of the Theater and Sanctuary of Asclepius, which was shown to have been substantially reconstructed in the 2nd century B.C⁴. Ceramic remains revealed strong trade contacts in the Roman period with Spain, Campania, southeastern Italy, Tunisia, Cyprus, Crete, and the Aegean⁵.

The project's second phase (2011-2013) aimed to discover the complete topographical layout of the forum in order to study the monument and its associated buildings as a unified complex⁶. In 2011, two trenches (Areas 16 and 17) revealed the limestone pavement slabs of the forum's eastern side, showing that this side of the forum was as well preserved as its western side (Fig. 3). The excavation campaign in 2012 brought to light the eastern end of the forum (Fig. 4). The fact that almost all the



Fig. 3. Forum pavement, discovered in 2011 (Area 17).

pavement slabs of the ancient town square remain in situ, encompassing an area of ca. 20 x 72 m, is remarkable and emphasizes the unique state of preservation of the Roman forum at Butrint. A broader aim of the project has been to examine the stratigraphy of the ancient urban center in order to gain insight into the origins of Butrint and its



Fig. 4. Roman basilica at the eastern end of the Roman forum, 2012 (Area 20).

phases of urbanism. In 2012 and 2013, excavations penetrated deep into the urban center, well below the level of the forum pavement (Fig. 5). Having worked to overcome the problems of water-logged deposits since 2005, the project has developed methods to excavate effectively below the water table, using a system of drainage trenches and water pumps. For the first time in the lower city, material remains were recovered for the earliest phases of the ancient urban center, dating to the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. This depositional sequence represents the formation of Butrint from its origins in the Archaic period to modern times.

A short introduction to Butrint and archaeological research at the site

Ancient Butrint was a seaport, located on the coast of Epirus, within eyesight of the island of Corfu. Oriented toward the sea, the city occupies a headland on a short navigable waterway, the Vivari channel, which joins an inland lagoon (Lake Butrint) to the Ionian Sea. Butrint's prosperity as a seaport in antiquity owed much to its position on

the eastern side of the Strait of Otranto, which was the critical trade route between Italy and Greece. The necropolis illustrates the importance that the city attached to the sea. Monumental tombs built on both banks of the water channel faced the seafarers who approached the city's "muddy" harbor⁷.

Butrint is described in Vergil's *Aeneid* as a "little Troy" (*parva Troia*), founded by Helenus, son of King Priam⁸. Hecataeus of Miletos, writing ca. 500 B.C., described Butrint as a *polis* around 500



Fig. 5. Excavation within the Roman basilica, 2012 (Area 21).

B.C., but Kerkyra (Corfu) appears to have claimed it as a mainland possession (*peraia*) before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War⁹. A settlement or sanctuary existed on the Acropolis by the 7th century B.C., judging from imported Corinthian pottery recovered at the site and the Orientalizing style of the (reused) lintel stone of the Lion Gate¹⁰. Luigi M. Ugolini, director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Albania, undertook the first excavations at the site from 1928-1936, revealing that the Hellenistic city centered on the Sanctuary of Asclepius¹¹. To date, 219 Greek inscriptions have been discovered at Butrint; most are manumission decrees dating to the 2nd century B.C. that invoke Asclepius in whose sanctuary the acts were performed¹².

As a port of call along the important trade route linking Italy and the East, Butrint had a geostrategic and commercial significance in the western Balkans. During Rome's civil war, Julius Caesar stationed one legion at Buthrotum and later established a plan to colonize the city¹³. With the help of Cicero, Titus Pomponius Atticus vigorously resisted the colonization program. Atticus owned an estate at Buthrotum, from which he received substantial income¹⁴. Butrint was colonized in July 44 B.C. predominantly by settlers who came from the urban poor of Rome. Just like the contemporary colonies at Corinth and Carthage, the colonization of Buthrotum was intended to relieve population pressure at Rome and stimulate trade with the Eastern Mediterranean. Augustus later refounded the colony, presumably with an infusion of veteran soldiers. The geostrategic and commercial significance of Butrint in the western Balkans endured long after the end of the Roman Empire, as evinced by the continued importance of the city to the Byzantine Empire and the Republic of Venice.

In 1992, Butrint was officially recognized by UNESCO as Albania's first World Heritage Site. Two years later, the Butrint Foundation began academic research focused on the late antique and medieval phases of the city and its hinterland. The results of focused excavations and comprehensive architectural, topographical, and geological surveys from 1994-1999 were published in *Byzantine Butrint* and in a series of academic articles¹⁵. From 2000-

2007, the Butrint Foundation in partnership with the Packard Humanities Institute sponsored excavations and surveys to examine important monuments and complexes that had remained abandoned, unpublished, or poorly understood. The most important of these were the Triconch Palace, the Roman villa at nearby Diaporit, the Roman suburb on the Vrina Plain, and the Roman forum (first phase)¹⁶.

Roman forum excavations: methods and stratigraphy

The Roman Forum Excavations employ a single-context-planning recording system in conjunction with stratigraphic matrices¹⁷. A Sokkia 1X Total Station is used to provide accurate mapping of the site, small finds, and archaeological features. Registers are maintained for all contexts, small finds, bulk finds, drawings, and photographs. Every context is planned on drafting film by hand. Elevations are drawn for masonry structures, and all section faces from trenches are drawn to scale. Drawings are made at standard architectural scales of one-to-ten, one-to-twenty, and (rarely) one-to-fifty. The stratigraphic relationships recorded on context sheets are expressed graphically on running stratigraphic matrices. The resulting archaeological record allows for a complete three-dimensional recreation of the stratigraphy, finds, topography, and architecture. The team includes archaeological specialists in ceramics, glass, numismatics, archaeobotany, archaeozoology, geophysics, archaeometry, human osteology, and archaeological conservation.

The depth of deposits from the surface to the level of the forum pavement ranges from two to three meters. For safety purposes, trenches are stepped by ca. 0.8 meters at a depth of every ca. 1.2 meters. Deposits are sieved using a 2 mm wire mesh in order to increase the retrieval of finds and allow for an accurate statistical interpretation of bulk-find and small-find distributions between different layers. In cases where deposits are rich in material remains, these are sieved in totality. A principal aim of the project has been to probe deep into Butrint's urban center by excavating well below

the water-table. A two-trench system of excavation has been developed in which water is mechanically pumped out of a smaller trench in order to drain a larger one, which could then be dried and excavated stratigraphically. In 2012, the excavations reached a depth of seven meters below the surface, representing four meters below the water-table. The material remains recovered from these depths have yielded important evidence not only for the earliest urban phases of Butrint but also for the formation processes of the Butrint headland.

Characteristically, the water-logged deposits have preserved organic materials extremely well. The project has recovered the first ancient wooden objects at Butrint, as well as seeds, charcoal, and other organic remains. The project's archaeobotanical study of seeds and organic compounds, through the use of a collection system of water flotation, is formulating the first diachronic environmental history of Butrint's urban center (Fig. 6). The sampling strategy and the application of flotation



Fig. 6. Archaeobotanist, Diego Sabato, processing deposits by flotation.

and water sieving techniques aim at exploring the interaction between historical habitation at the site and the natural environment. The nature of the site with material preserved by both charring and waterlogging necessitated the development of two different recovery techniques: flotation, based on Hillman's flotation machine, and water sieving¹⁸. Deposits containing large quantities of plant remains are sampled in totality. Layers in which plant remains are less evident are sampled with a minimum volume size of 15 liters. In addition, particular areas such as graves, wells, floors, and rubbish dumps are sampled more extensively. Sediments processed through the flotation machine run through two meshes to separate the heavy fraction (1 mm) from the light fraction (250 μ). The light fraction is sieved using a column of 4mm, 2mm, 0.5mm and 0.25mm sieves. Because Roman and pre-Roman layers are preserved under water, water-logged deposits are sampled and passed through the same column of sieves after screening.¹⁹ The archaeobotanical material is studied by specialists with access to reference collections in Madrid and Rome.

The discovery of the Roman basilica and the eastern end of the forum

Excavations in Area 20 revealed the western wall of the East Building fronting the forum pavement (Figs. 7, 8). The wall in *opus mixtum* was preserved to a height of 2.7 m (maximum). The same building was discovered in Area 19. The wall runs north in the trench for a distance of ca. 10 m and terminates at a quoin, which was part of the original build. An earlier construction phase in *opus incertum* was identified on the northern and eastern sides of the building. The East building had a large central door, 3.4 m wide, which was blocked in a later phase. The door blocking shows that the building ceased to communicate with the forum in its final phase. The reduction of the two southern entrances into the building by half (1.5 m), revealed in Areas 19 and 23, probably belongs to this last phase of the building. Originally, the East Building was oriented westward to face the forum, as evinced by its large central door. In its final phase, however, the building

Ancient Urban Center of Butrint

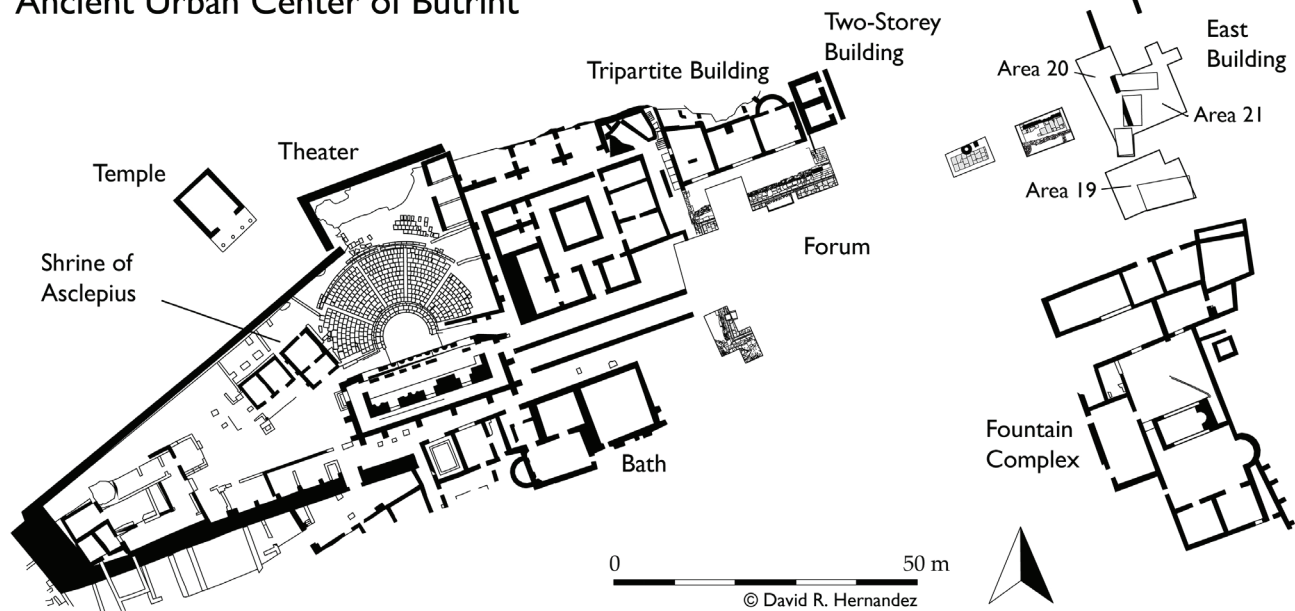


Fig. 7. Plan of areas 19, 20, and 21.

appears to have faced south, with the western side of the building having no communication with the forum.

The building's northern wall was truncated in a later phase near the building's northwestern corner, which was the earlier building phase in *opus incertum*. The purpose of the truncation was to build an annex that would expand the northern end of the building. The annex, which is the vaulted structure in *opus testaceum* observed by Ugolini, abutted the truncated edge of the building's northern wall. It runs for a distance of 6.5 m northward, before it terminates at a finished quoin. The two surviving walls of the annex show that the vaulting enclosed a space of 8.6 m in width. Large regularly-spaced rectangular holes in the masonry of the walls, at the level from which the vaulting springs, served to support timber beams for a second floor level. It is possible that the annex was built when the buildings orientation became N-S after the door to the forum was blocked. The N-S distance of the East Building measured from its northwestern corner in Area 20 to its southwestern corner in Area 19 is 23.3 m. The addition of the annex increased the size of the building to 30 m. The plan, form, and location of the building indicate that it functioned as a Basilica. The building held a preeminent position in the

forum and would have been the most architecturally dominant building in the town square. It represents the largest known Roman building at Butrint, measuring 30 x 12 m².

The width of the forum pavement at the eastern end of the forum, measured from the bases of the northern and southern steps, is 19 m. At its western end, the forum has a width of 20 m. The difference of 1 m can be somewhat accounted for by the fact that the western side of the forum is at a slight angle and not perpendicular to the parallel porticos of the forum. The open space of the forum encompasses an area of 20 x 72 m.

Five limestone steps were discovered in situ, forming the northern side of the forum. These five steps link to the five steps discovered in 2006 in Area 6 in front to the Two-Storey Building. It is now clear that the forum in its final phase featured five steps running along the northern side of the forum. The lower two steps belong to an earlier phase, probably contemporary with the construction of the pavement. The two lower steps show a greater amount of wear and are made of a somewhat different white limestone. A brick column, which was engaged to the wall of *opus incertum* of the Basilica, and a mortar impression for a second column indicate that a colonnade ran above the fifth

step. In 2013, excavations brought to light a series of public buildings at the northeastern end of the forum (Fig. 9).

The limestone pavement slabs of the forum were found in situ, running along the eastern end of the forum. Six pavement slabs from the northern portion of the forum, abutting the forum's eastern limestone gutter, were each cracked in half near their central N-S axis. The seventh pavement slab in this series is missing, because it was robbed out in the early medieval period when a deep pit was dug into it from above. Part of a white marble base with molding was set on the first step of the forum, adjacent to the northern side of the Basilica's central door. The base would have served to support a statue or inscription. The western portion of the base was robbed out, together with the missing pavement slab. The opening created by the missing paver revealed that the forum was constructed with an underground drainage tunnel running along the

eastern side of the forum beneath the eastern-most pavers. It appears that the pavers cracked when they were struck by a load before the drain came to be filled after the forum's abandonment. Given the proximity of the building, it is possible that a large fragment of masonry fell from the Basilica, cracking the 22 cm-thick limestone slabs in half. The earthquake of the late 4th century A.D., which brought an end to the forum, could possibly have been the cause.

The south stoa

The post-excavation photograph of Area 19 shows a number of important monuments and physical structures, representing the southeastern corner of the Roman forum (Fig. 10). Twelve fragmented limestone slabs came to light. These are well finished and smooth. The dimensions of the slabs range from 1.49 x 1.27 m (maximum) to

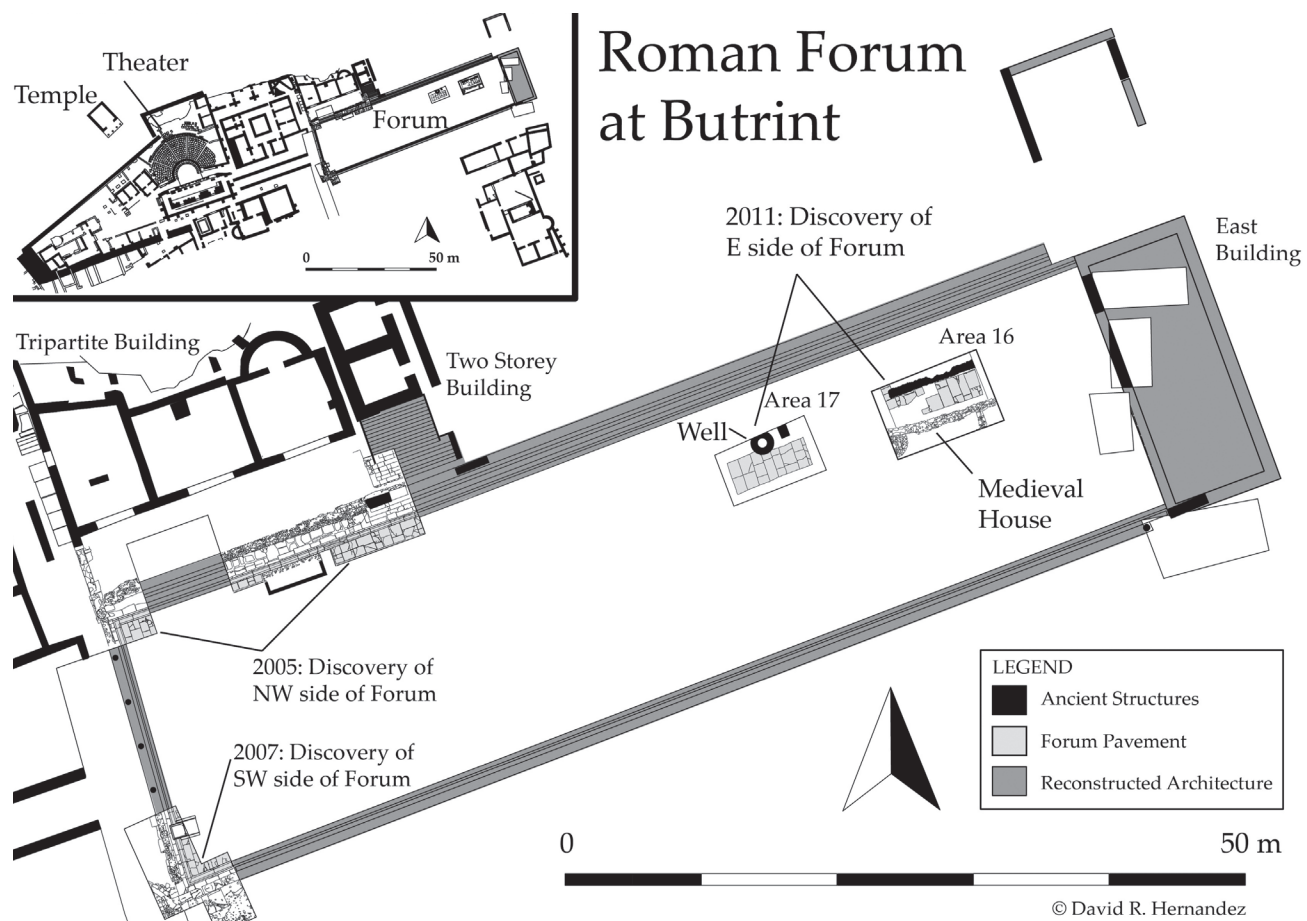


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the Roman forum.



Fig. 9. Northeastern buildings of the forum, discovered in 2013 (Area 22).

0.82 x 0.44 m (minimum). One slab near the south-facing section of the trench features a rectangular impression of rust made from a monument which was originally located there. It might possibly represent the imprint of a bronze inscription or statue. An integral limestone gutter outlines the pavement.

Two standing columns were discovered in situ, situated on the southern steps of the forum. The columns (45 cm diameter) are made of sandstone and are fluted (6-7 cm wide). They rise to height of 1.38 m, show entasis, and belong to the Doric order. The tops of the columns are flat and worked smooth for the placement of a second row of column drums.

The steps upon which the columns are set originally belonged to a Hellenistic building, which was clearly truncated on its eastern end and incorporated into the forum as a portico, when the complex was constructed. Excavation behind the steps revealed foundation stones, confirming that the steps originally functioned as the stylobate of a pre-existing building. The stylobate shows a much higher level of wear than the two adjacent steps set

Fig. 10. Southeastern corner of the forum (Area 19).



to its east that complete the portico of the forum. Moreover, the southern side of the blocks of the stylobate are in line and well-worked, whereas the adjacent blocks have irregular shaped backs. Lifting bosses in the shape of deltas were used as decoration for the original building, forming an alternating pattern between the two steps of the stylobate. It appears that the columns belonged to the original building. The intercolumniation is 1.8 m. All these features of the Hellenistic building are identical to the truncated stylobate discovered in 2007 at the southwestern end of the forum, which was also truncated and incorporated into the design of the forum (Figs. 11)²⁰. Both ends appear to represent the same building, namely, the South Stoa.

The South Stoa would have been greater than 72 m in length, featuring at least 40 columns on its northern side. The width of the building was discovered in 2013, measuring 11 m wide (Fig. 12). Megarian bowls were recovered from the fill

deposits associated with the construction of the building. These date the building to the 2nd century B.C. The stoa represents the largest pre-Roman building known at Butrint. It serves as evidence for the location of the *agora*, which the forum likely came to replace.

Excavation beneath the forum

The excavation of the Roman Basilica in Area 21 at the eastern end of the forum reached the buildings internal floor, which was made of thick, yellow, water-resistant mortar (Fig. 5). The building was apparently thoroughly spoliated after its abandonment in the 5th century A.D., as no remains above the mortar floor were found. The deposits below the floor of the Basilica did not contain any pottery dating to the Roman imperial period, thereby suggesting that the basilica was originally constructed at the end of the 1st century B.C. or



Fig. 11. Southwestern corner of the forum (Area 15).



Fig. 12. Post-excavation photograph of areas 19 and 29 in 2013.

early 1st century A.D. The basilica is contemporary with the construction of the forum in the time of Augustus.

The deposits beneath the floor provided the most important evidence to date for the development of the ancient urban center of Butrint. The water-logged deposits have allowed us to recover a range of organic remains through flotation, such as seeds and charcoal, as well as pieces of wood and textile. A well-preserved head of a terracotta figurine

was found dating to the 2nd century B.C., perhaps representing a Bacchic dancer imported from Tarentum (Fig. 13). The excavation also recovered a terracotta head of this goddess figurine dating also to the 4th or 3rd century B.C. (Fig. 14).

Deep beneath the level of the forum in deposits dating earlier than the 4th century B.C., we encountered the ancient coast of the city (Fig. 15). Excavating into the coastal deposit, at the depth of 7 meters below the surface, almost 4 meters below the

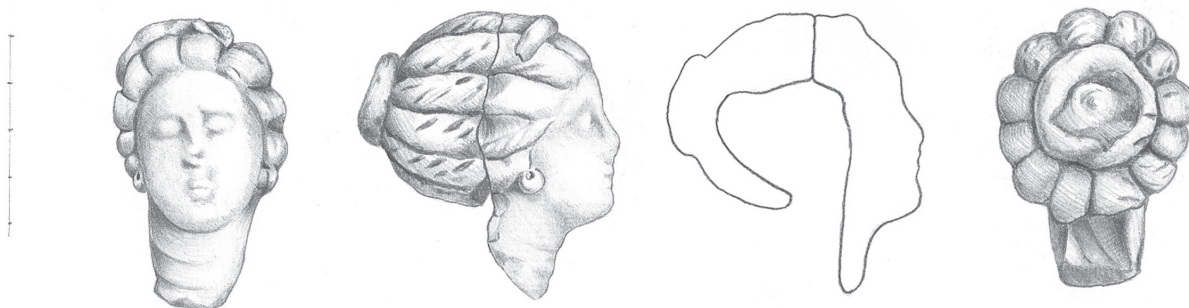


Fig. 13. Terrocotta head of figurine, possibly *Bacchic Reveler*, 2nd century B.C



Fig. 14. Terrocotta head of figurine, 4th-3rd century B.C.

present water table, we recovered ceramics of early to late Corinthian manufacture, dating from the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. The assemblage includes a number of Protocorinthian kotylai, as well as Corinthian Type A amphorae. The deposit dates to the 6th century B.C. Radiocarbon dates from wood recovered from the lowest deposits are consistent with these dates, with a 95% probability of falling within the date range of 730-400 B.C.

Conclusion

The project has revealed the topographical layout of the forum and has identified the most architecturally dominant building at its eastern end. The Roman Basilica was constructed at the end of the 1st century B.C. or early 1st century A.D. The forum at Butrint can now be placed among the basilica-forum types seen throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire, such as at Corinth and the imperial forum of Trajan at Rome²¹. The Basilica was reoriented in the 3rd or 4th century, to face south, and an annex was added to the northern end of the building to expand its length to 30 m. The discovery and excavation of the forum Basilica has produced



Fig. 15. Discovery of the coastal deposit beneath the forum in 2011 (Area 16).

an archaeological record for the largest and most important Roman building in the urban center.

The construction date of the basilica and its phases of reconstruction also reflect on a larger level the phases of development of the entire forum, from its foundation to its end.

The excavations reached a depth of seven meters below the modern surface. The project was able to recover physical remains from the earliest phases of the ancient urban center. Greek colonization along the south Adriatic and Ionian coast is thought to have occurred in the 8th or 7th centuries B.C., in tandem with the Greek colonization of south Italy and Sicily. Hard evidence for the foundation dates of any Greek colonies or settlements in the western Balkan coast is lacking (e.g., Epidamnus, Apollonia, Oricum, etc.). The detailed analysis and publication of material remains from the deepest levels in the urban center of Butrint will provide new insight into the role of Butrint in the Archaic period. The results have the potential to establish a new paradigm for the origins of Butrint and the formation of the ancient urban center.

NOTES

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2 HERNANDEZ, ÇONDI 2008; HERNANDEZ, ÇONDI 2010.

3 HERNANDEZ 2007.

4 UGOLINI 1937; UGOLINI 1942.

5 REYNOLDS, HERNANDEZ, ÇONDI 2008.

6 HERNANDEZ, ÇONDI 2012; ÇONDI, HERNANDEZ 2013.

7 HERNANDEZ, MITCHELL 2012. STRABO (7.7.5) describes the port as pelodes (muddy).

8 VERG., AEN. 3.289-505.

9 Steph. Byz. Frag. 106; Thuc. 3.85.

10 ARAFAT, MORGAN 1995; HAXHIS 1998.

11 UGOLINI 1935; UGOLINI 1937; UGOLINI 1942; UGOLINI 2003.

12 CABANES, DRINI 2007.

13 Caes., BC 3.16; Cic., Att. 16.16.

14 Nep., Att. 14; Cic., Att. 1.5, 1.13; Varro, Rust. 2.2.1-20.

15 HODGES, BOWDEN, LAKO 2004; HODGES *et al.* 1997; BOWDEN, HODGES, LAKO 1998; BOWDEN 1999; HODGES *et al.* 2000.

16 HODGES 2006; HANSEN, HODGES 2007; BOWDEN, HODGES 2010; BOWDEN, HODGES 2011; HANSEN, HODGES, LEPPARD 2013; BOWDEN 2002; BOWDEN 2003; HANSEN, GILKES, CROWSON 2005; BEJKO, HODGES 2006; CROWSON 2007; BOWDEN, PËRZHITA 2004; MITCHELL, GILKES, ÇONDI 2005; GILKES *et al.* 2007.

17 HARRIS 1979; BIBBY 1993; HAMMOND 1993; PEARSON, WILLIAMS 1993; ROSKAMS 2001.

18 RENFREW, BAHN 1991; HELBAEK 1969; STRUEVER 1968; FRENCH 1971; KEELEY 1978; WATSON 1976.

19 HOSCH, ZIBULSKI 2003; VANDORPE, JACOMET 2007.

20 See HERNANDEZ, ÇONDI 2008.

21 RUSSEL 1968; BALTÛ 1991.

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