

# DECODING BUTRINT'S FORTIFICATIONS

*Excavations and  
Surveys 2005–2009*

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**T**HE PAINTER EDWARD LEAR, visiting Butrint in 1857, was evidently fascinated by its powerful fortifications. Unlike previous visitors, drawn here by the description of the ancient city in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lear's pictorial legacy shows that it was Butrint's defenses that made it visually arresting. Now, in the seventy years since the Italian Archaeological Mission unearthed Butrint's Hellenistic and Roman remains, the growth of a woodland canopy has altered the place in visual terms. The two concentric circles of towering defenses (around the acropolis and lower city) are today less obviously as imposing and powerful. The Butrint Foundation, however, adjudged the fortifications to be a metaphor of the long history of Butrint as a city. But rather than interpreting the continuous rebuilding of the walls and accompanying towers as symbols of Butrint's inexorable struggle with invaders and conquerors, we viewed these remains as a coded history from the Archaic Greek age to the Ottoman era. The walls, in effect, manifest the ups and downs of Butrint as an Adriatic Sea town. Since 2004, when Andrew Crowson and James G. Schryver carried out their scoping mission to better understand one of Butrint's most remarkable monuments, we have made a detailed photogrammetric survey

Archaeologists record Butrint's acropolis fortifications.

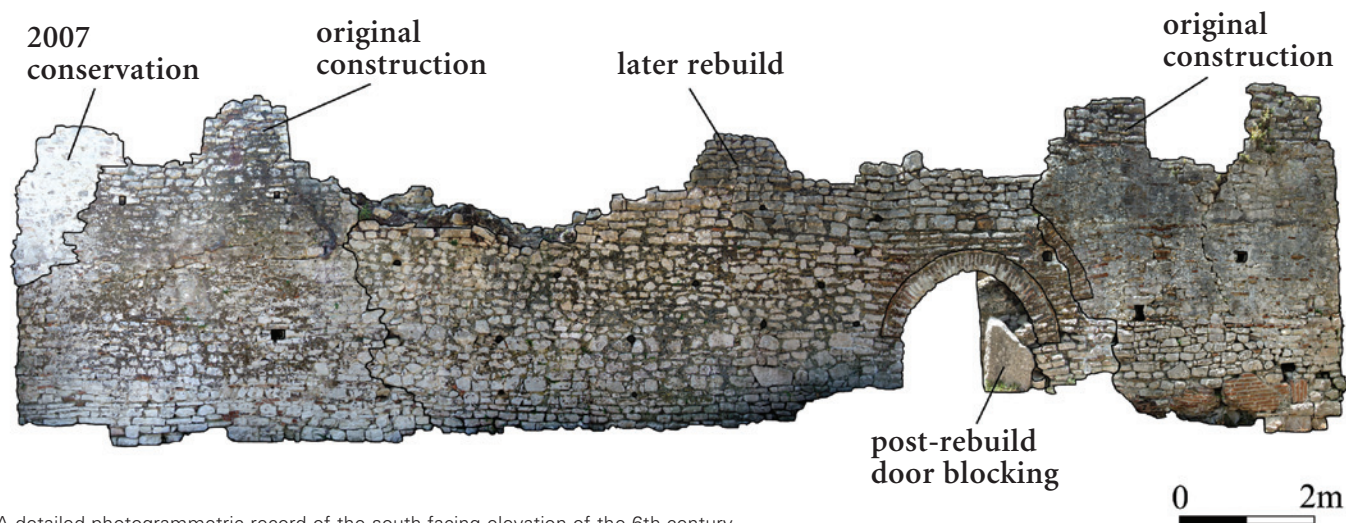


of the walls (in collaboration with Siena University) and have conducted several new illuminating excavations.

The earliest walls, running along the south side of the acropolis, belong to the Archaic Greek age. Constructed of huge blocks, this cyclopean style still confounds us. Are the remaining sections part of a fortified acropolis of the 7th century BC or simply terraces dramatically located on the prominent edge of the hilltop? We incline these days to the latter conclusion. No such uncertainty exists about the exquisitely made Hellenistic walls. Erected around the lower town, these elegant ashlar walls, graced with towered gates, defined the first urban community. The walls provided urban grandeur to the sanctuary to Asclepius, including a theater, which prospered under Republican Roman rule. Intriguingly, when Julius Caesar, then Augustus, founded a colony at Butrint late in the 1st century BC, no new defenses were erected. Quite the contrary, the Hellenistic walling beside the public piazza—the agora, we now know after major excavations—was dismantled to create an enlarged forum.



Conservation of the walls is an important part of the plan to preserve Butrint.



A detailed photogrammetric record of the south-facing elevation of the 6th-century water gate was created by the Butrint Foundation and Siena University.

Roman Butrint expanded well beyond its Hellenistic walls in the 1st century AD, but new fortifications were deemed unnecessary until much later in the late 5th century. A Vandal attack in the 470s upon the coastal cities of Epirus doubtless prompted a concern about the town's security. These late Roman fortifications follow the waterline surrounding the

promontory on which Butrint sits. Evidently built by gangs, each using a different constructional style, these walls were strengthened with projecting two-story towers. Many sections incorporated older buildings or in some cases veered around extant Roman dwellings. Three prominent features merit mentioning. First, the western, seaward defenses were



graced with major towers, far more impressive than those found elsewhere on the circuit. Second, on the far side of the town, beside the 37-arched 1st century Roman bridge (only two arches survive today) leading to the inland plain, an elegantly arched water gate was constructed. This gate provided water-born ingress to the eastern part of Butrint, including the Great Basilica and adjacent baptistery, close to the bridge. Lastly, the acropolis was unfortified, although a single tower dominated the south-facing flank.

A century later Butrint was virtually abandoned, as were so many Roman towns. But excavations in the western defenses show that two of the 5th century towers served as two-story dwellings, probably of the local commander, until both were destroyed by fire—most likely sacked—around AD 800. Who exactly burnt these tower houses down remains a mystery. No less intriguing is that by *ca.* AD 850, the commander deserted the old town and occupied a surprisingly unfortified dwelling on the plain south of Butrint, remaining outside the old nucleus until the late 10th century. Communal defense, we now know, became important again early in the 11th century as the lower fortifications were refurbished and new defenses now enclosed the acropolis. These walls are distinctive for their roughly resized ashlar blocks robbed from Hellenistic buildings. Excavations in the two western towers—destroyed by fire around AD 800—show that these too were reoccupied at this time. The new walls effectively defined the first medieval town, with internal landscaping occurring alongside the renewed emphasis upon security.

The towering walls that captured Edward Lear's imagination, however, belong to the later Middle Ages when Butrint passed through many hands. So, a second extensive campaign of renewal was executed in the mid-13th century when Butrint was in the hands of the Epirote Despots, probably during the rule of Michael II (1230–1266). Michael II is credited with the refurbishment of the powerful castle of Arta, where the same masonry style consisting of irregularly shaped stones, abundant mortar, densely stacked tile fragments, and circular put-log holes can be observed. A second line of western, seaward defenses replaced the earlier walls damaged in the sack around AD 800. An even greater emphasis upon defense appears late



Archaeologists examine the Tower 2 destruction level.

in the 13th century when Butrint passed into Angevin hands. Besides a new castle at the west end of the acropolis, the fortifications were strengthened still further when a high wall was run down the steep slope from the acropolis to the north bay, shutting off this vulnerable flank. Its well-laid, mixed construction materials closely resemble the well-preserved defenses of the great Epirote castle of Rhogoi, near Arta (which reoccupied a Hellenistic town). These towering walls mark the apogee of Butrint's fortifications before the Venetians assumed control of the port in 1386.

Our survey of the Venetian written sources reveals constant concern about the exasperating expense of repairing the walls. From this time, we deduce, the last patching of the walls occurred before the Venetian commander reduced his defensive responsibilities to a new tower in the old ruined city and a new triangular fortress on the south side of the Vivari Channel. When Lear visited in 1857, the Ottoman community of Butrint was reduced to fisherman gathered around the triangular castle. Opposite stood miles of fortifications in various stages of decay, each section bearing witness to the town's episodic and laborious concern with its protection. 🏰

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