

# THE FORTY SAINTS RECONSIDERED



BY RICHARD HODGES & JOHN MITCHELL



Luigi Maria Ugolini's photograph of the south-facing elevation of the basilica in the 1930s.

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pectacularly situated above the Straits of Corfu in southern Albania, this large, complex church was built in Late Antiquity—probably in the age of the Emperor Justinian (AD 527–565)—and remained a shrine until Communist

times. A new survey reveals the changing architecture of the great church, its crypts, and painted decoration. Metropolitan in scale, the Forty Saints for a millennium or more was perhaps the most important pilgrimage destination in the Ionian Sea region.

The late antique and medieval church of the Forty Saints occupies the prominent hill above the city of Saranda in southwest Albania. This church would have dominated not only ancient Onchesmos, the Roman precursor of Saranda, but also the seaways reaching southward down the Straits of Corfu and westward in the direction of Sicily. As a seamount it is not surprising that the church has given its name to Saranda (a version of *Santa Quaranta*, forty saints) at least since the 12th century when the crusader Benedict of Peterborough first mentions it.

The Forty Saints that gave their name to the church were soldiers in the army of Licinius, who in AD 320 refused to forsake their Christian faith and were made to stand in a frozen pond until they expired. Their cult was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean, and relics in the form of human skeletal remains were held

at Constantinople and Caesarea. They enjoyed particular veneration in the age of the Emperor Justinian (AD 527–565), and his chronicler Procopius records how the Byzantine emperor was cured of a serious infection of the knee when his leg was brought into contact with the relics, which had recently been discovered.

The largely ruined basilica was first published by the Italian archaeologist, Luigi Maria Ugolini in the 1920s, who described Santa Quaranta as the finest of all the churches he had seen during his travels in Albania. At that time there was still a church there associated with the cult of the Forty Martyrs. A ground-plan drawn up in 1938 by the Danish architectural historian Ejnar Dyggve describes a curious building with a large single nave, a *heptaconch* (seven side conches or apses), with a principal axial apse at the east end and three large lateral niches or conchs

constructed in the thickness of the walls on each flank. To the west is an interior *narthex* (entrance hall) and beyond that possibly an exterior narthex, flanked symmetrically by attendant rectangular structures. The hilltop basilica was largely flattened by bombing during the Second World War and by the subsequent construction of a military base present there until 1997.

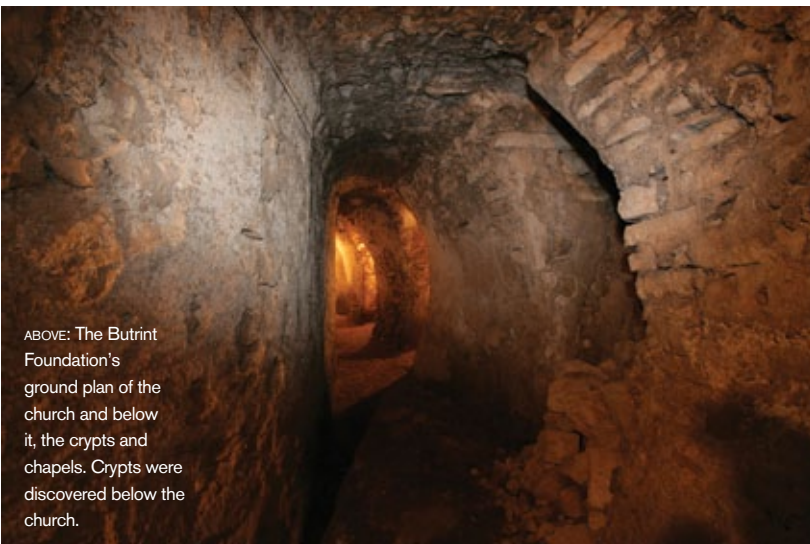
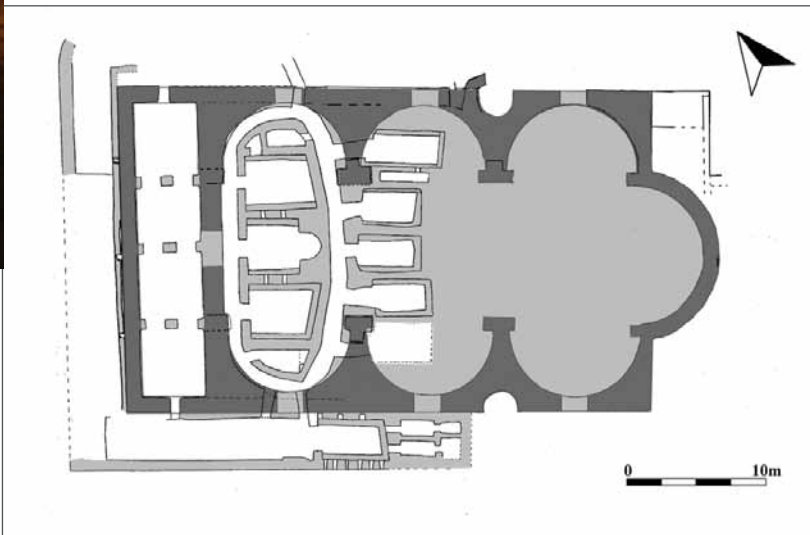
### A PROGRAM OF SURVEY, CLEANING, AND CONSERVATION

The Butrint Foundation had the opportunity to make a new survey of the ruined remains in 2001–2002 and

confirmed that Dyggve's plan was generally trustworthy, although the relationship of the basilica to the elaborate sequence of underground crypts and oratories as well as an adjoining relic chapel, constructed under the western end of the nave, was more complex than he had imagined. A striking feature of the building is a series of dedicatory inscriptions in Greek made of broken tile and potsherds on the east, north, and west sides of the building. Some of these potsherds are clearly 5th or 6th century in date. The Albanian Institute of Archaeology has cleared the voluminous rubble masking the structures, revealing much more of the basilica and its associated buildings than was visible

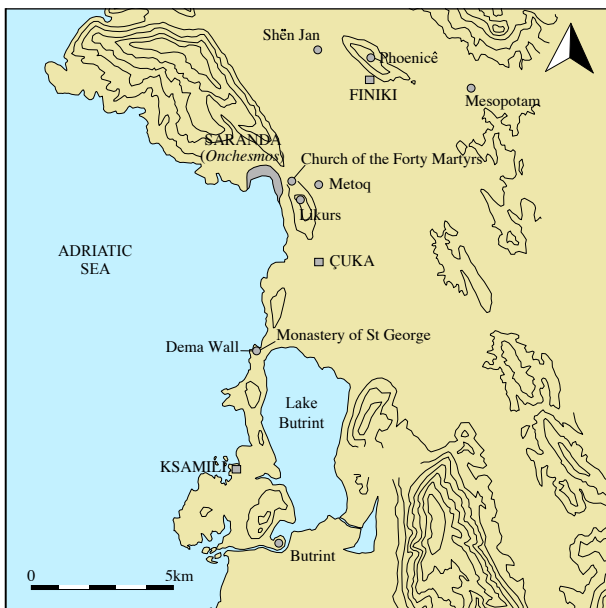
a decade ago. Meanwhile the Albanian Institute of Monuments in 2005 undertook conservation of some of the painted frescoes in the crypts below. This short report sets out our new interpretation of the building history of the Forty Saints and focuses on one important painted panel from a redecoration of one of the chapels below the basilica, which we cautiously date to the Middle Byzantine period.

The church was a large rectangular structure about 43 m long (excluding the later vaulted thoroughfare on its façade, carrying an outer narthex) and 23 m wide, with a projecting apse. The interior was remarkable, as Ugolini and Dyggve noted, taking the form of a heptaconch, with three large contiguous *exedras* or conchs on either side, which were of somewhat greater dimensions than the eastern apse. The conchs are contained within the massive lateral walls of the building. Ugolini describes the walls of the six great lateral conchs and the eastern apse as being pierced by many doors, windows, and niches, and it is clear from early photographs that the apse and the nave were lit by large arched windows above. At floor-level the north and south walls of the church were pierced by arched doors at the apex of each conch and articulated with deep niches on both the interior and



ABOVE: The Butrint Foundation's ground plan of the church and below it, the crypts and chapels. Crypts were discovered below the church.





TOP: This photograph was taken above the city of Saranda in the 1920s.

LEFT: Map showing the location of Santa Quaranta, Albania.

RIGHT: Postcard of St. Quaranta, Saranda, 1920.

the exterior. The building was expertly constructed from limestone, drafted for the façade but largely unworked for the rest of the building. Bricks seem to have been employed occasionally in the upper reaches of the walls and in the window arches. At one stage the nave was paved with slabs of local limestone and the inner narthex appears to have had a flooring of terracotta tiles.

## A 1,500-YEAR HISTORY

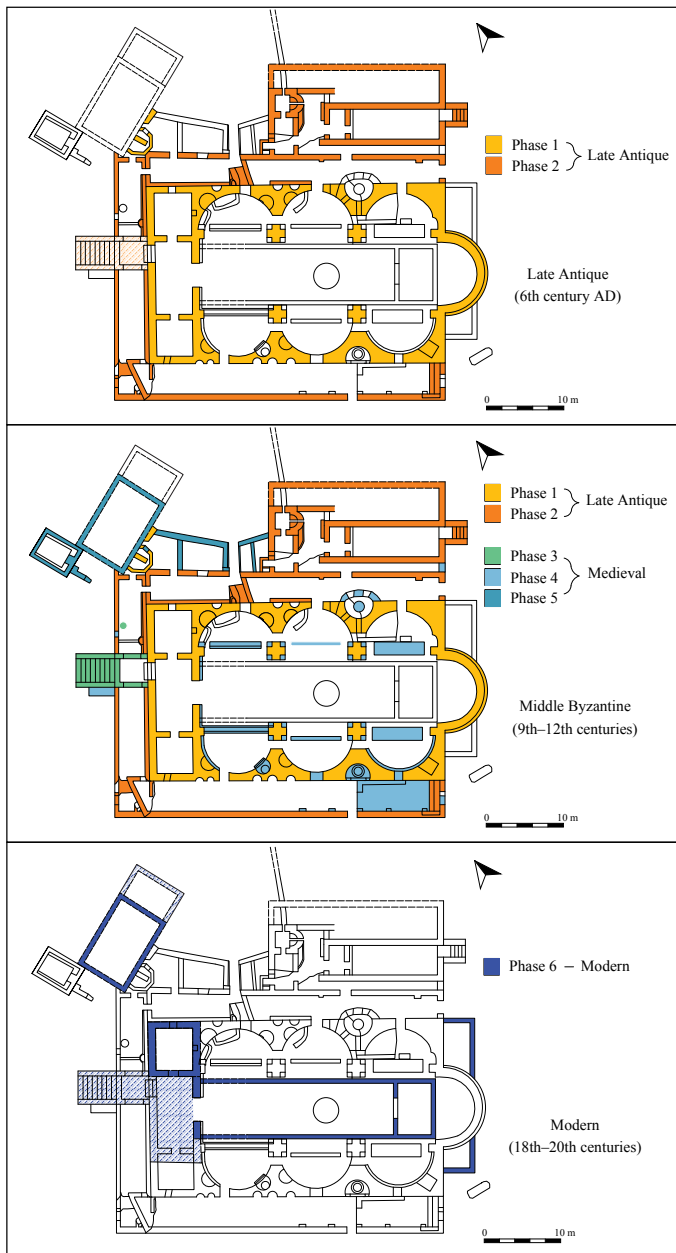
Although much of the superstructure of the basilica has long been demolished, pilgrims continue to place flowers in discrete niches within the shattered building. As a place it still possesses an importance for the Greek orthodox communities here. The now ruined structure is evidently a palimpsest of several major and numerous minor re-buildings spanning

the last 1,500 years. The first major building (Phase 1) essentially consisted of the nave with its seven conches and a western narthex that jettied out over the steeply falling slope of the hill, supported by a sequence of four large vaulted underlying substructures. The basilica was entered from three doors on the north and south sides, presumably reached by passages later occupied by the Phase 2 aisles flanking the nave. In other words there was no main entrance from the west at this time. Instead it would seem that the narthex could only be accessed from the nave of the church and must have functioned as a gallery, with a spectacular prospect to the west. The lower complex of passageways and oratories behind these vaulted spaces also belong to this initial phase of the building, as do four surviving votive inscriptions, in terracotta tile and potsherds, recording the names of benefactors on the west façade and the north front. At least three others, recorded but now lost, existed on the north and east faces of the church.

Phase 2 was more grandiose: outer aisles were added to the north and south, and to the west an impressive vaulted way, built against the west façade, provided a new dignified route to the long barrel-vaulted relic chapel, against the south flank of the church. This chapel, its eastern relic chamber illuminated by six small windows set in the south wall of the building, appears to have been the principal locus of the cult. A new, steep stairway led up over the central bay of the vaulted corridor, into the narthex of the basilica, and an outer narthex may have risen over the new vaults along the length of the façade.

This must have given the building an extraordinary new prominence at the apex of the steep hillside.

Many of the service buildings wrapped around the north side of



New phase plan of Santa Quaranta (by Sarah Leppard).





LEFT: This late antique cult pond dates to the 6th century. It may replicate the lake in which the forty martyrs perished. BELOW: A detail of a newly discovered painting depicts Christ pulling a saint's beard.

the church appear to belong to this period. At least one of these was a simple bathhouse, presumably for ablutions before entering the shrine. A small reservoir or pond beside the apse may have symbolically replicated the lake where the martyrs perished. Excavations to date have failed to locate any associated buildings on the south side.

The next phases are more difficult to disentangle and our interpretation must be treated with caution until a full excavation report appears. In Phase 3 the western staircase was repaired or strengthened. This staircase probably accompanied a major initiative (Phase 4) to hold up the basilica: a line of piers on either side of the nave were almost certainly inserted to support the internal vaults of the conches. It is our speculation that this major rebuilding, involving the crude shoring up of the earlier church, was probably contemporary with a second phase of painted decoration (though see below), preserved in the relic chapel and some of the oratories below the church. One passage of these paintings shows Christ pulling the long beard of a saint with a square nimbus. This passage appears to date from the Mid-Byzantine period, between the 9th and 12th centuries, indicating that renewed interest was now being taken in this pilgrimage monastery. Amongst the small additions in Phase 5 was a probable hostelry for pilgrims to the north of the narthex



which largely survives today because it was used as accommodation for soldiers stationed here until the 1990s. The last major phase of construction (Phase 6) belongs to the modern era: a narrow nave was inserted within the ruined basilica (the old Phase 1 walls, which remained standing to their full height) and a new reduced entrance arrangement was inserted into the earlier structure, which survived to be photographed in the 1930s.

This new phasing shows that the late antique basilica at Santa Quaranta, probably built in the late 5th or early 6th century, was the architectural nucleus of a larger pilgrimage center. The basilica with its distinctive conches was subsequently refurbished with makeshift piers supporting the earlier structure. This refurbishment probably dates to the Mid-Byzantine period, between the 9th and 12th centuries, when the church once more served as a place of pilgrimage along the seaways between Italy and Greece. Finally, following the collapse of the vaults supporting the early conches, a smaller, narrower church was inserted in modern times within the ruins.

### THE NEW PAINTINGS IN THE CRYPT

From the outset, it appears that the subterranean annular corridor with its sequence of ten chapels and oratories beneath the western bay of the nave, together with the vaulted relic chamber built against the south wall of the church, were intended to be embellished with an extensive and more or less uniform scheme of painted decoration. In an initial phase, sometime around the year AD 500, the eastern, focal walls of each of the eastern run of oratories were painted with a scheme of a triple arcade, a large central arch flanked by two smaller ones, with a characteristic and prominent cross with splayed terminals in the lunette of the central arch. A palm tree laden with dates was painted on either side of the entrance to each oratory to add a mark of paradisiacal sanctity. Lunettes with crosses of the same type were painted over the *fenestellae* (windows illuminating the shrine) in the southern relic chamber, the windows giving onto two long horizontal shafts in which the principal relics would appear to have been deposited.

In a subsequent phase, either in Phase 2, in late antiquity, or more probably Phase 3, the Middle Byzantine period, this underground complex underwent a comprehensive decorative makeover. In the relic chamber two large lamp-niches in the northern, left-hand wall were filled in, the surfaces were re-plastered, and a sequence of nine frontal standing saints were painted a little under life-size along its length. Parts of the haloes of these figures are preserved painted in a brilliant blue, using the pigment known as Egyptian Blue, and contoured in red. Their names were inscribed about their heads in large black capital letters. In the eastern range of oratories, extensive

remains of a corresponding second phase of decoration, as in the relic-chamber, were painted on a new skim of plaster laid over the original painted scheme.

### THE FUTURE

Santa Quaranta is undoubtedly one of the best-preserved and most remarkable churches of the 1st millennium in the Adriatic Sea region. Its Byzantine architect conceived of it on a metropolitan scale, worthy of Constantinople or Salonika. Indeed, the unusual plan of the great basilica is paralleled in late antique multi-apsed *trichinia*, (large apsidal halls) such as the banqueting hall of the Palace of Lausus in Constantinople (which also possessed seven conches). Like its parallel at San Michele on the Gargano peninsula of northern Apulia, Italy, its impressive elevated façade was intended to draw attention from travelers of all kinds, in this instance passing through the Ionian Sea. Much needs to be done to stabilize the walls and present this long, complicated history with its 1,500 years of references to the forty martyrs. The relationship of these important paintings to the architectural history of the region needs to be determined more precisely. Situated in such a spectacular location, if the ruin is eloquently explained, it is likely to attract a new generation of visitors. ●

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### FOR FURTHER READING

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