UNRAVELING BUTRINT

Putting Together a City’s History by Studying Its Walls

BY JAMES G. SCHRYVER
PUZZLES AND PIECES

“You like a good puzzle, don’t you?” These were the words with which Richard Hodges, the Scientific Director of the Butrint Foundation, began my first tour of the fortifications of Butrint. Like most archaeologists, I immediately answered “yes.” About two hours later, I realized that what he should have asked me was whether I liked ten good puzzles, with some of the pieces missing, all of the rest mixed together, and only a few scattered and torn pieces of a box top to guide me. Studying the various bits of wall and fortification at Butrint in order to piece together their history has proven to be just such an exercise. Although I might not have answered him as quickly had I known this, in the end the task proved both ten times as interesting and ten times as rewarding. By examining the various building phases of Butrint’s fortifications, it became possible to tell quite an interesting story about the walls that surround the site and how they both determined and reflected where the inhabitants entered the city and what parts of it they used over time.

Known in the past as Buthrotum, Butrint is located in Albania near the border separating that country from Greece. Situated on a promontory at the edge of a large saltwater lake, it provides visitors with breathtaking views of portions of the lake and surrounding hills, the Straits of Corfu, and the channel and marshlands that connect them. These views make a visit to the site unforgettable.

In the 1990s, however, this scenic setting nearly led to the area’s demise. When Albania’s communist government was forced to resign in 1991, and the country emerged from 30 years of self-imposed and devastating isolation, developers began to gaze hungrily on the site and its surrounding landscape. It is largely through the efforts of the Butrint Foundation, and its main backers, Lord Rothschild and Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover, that the site was preserved from development. Butrint has since become further protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the area around it is also now preserved as part of a national park.

Scientific investigations at the site began in earnest in 1994 when the Butrint Foundation partnered with the Albanian Institute of Archaeology to initiate a project examining the Byzantine phase of the city. As part of this project, an initial survey of the walls was completed, which served as the foundation for the present study. Most important was the identification of a number of major phases or episodes of construction including two that were thought to have occurred during the Middle Ages. Additional excavations and projects, including the work described here, have started to examine other phases of the site’s 3,000-year history as well. Throughout, archaeological, historical, and environmental investigations at the site have been based on an integrative approach that focuses not only on architecture and artifacts but also on the landscape setting and immediate environs. In addition, work has been guided by the recognition of just how much modern-day decisions can affect this treasure from the past, and by the practice of integrating conservation/preservation and presentation to the public into the program of excavation and study. As a result of these past and continuing efforts, Butrint thrives today as a popular tourist destination, and our knowledge and understanding of the site continue to grow.
The task assigned by Richard Hodges—to sort out, organize, and assemble the pieces making up the history of Butrint’s walls and fortifications—was part of a three-pronged reassessment of the site. Other aspects included a translation into English of the seminal work on the fortifications by the former head of the Albanian Institute of Monuments, Gjerak Karaiskaj, and the planning and implementation of conservation and presentation programs related to an expected increase in tourism at Butrint. This reassessment was crucial to the future of the site, as my co-investigator, Andrew Crowson, and I soon learned in carrying out our study. Once one stepped away from the main paths, the same vegetation that makes the area so beautiful was destroying those very parts of the site that we were trying to study and preserve. Unfortunately, the path of least resistance for many visitors investigating Butrint was often along the tops of its crumbling walls. The summer of 2007 saw the implementation of an extensive de-vegetation program that cleared areas of ruins and provided safer routes of access for visitors.

**SORTING OUT THE PIECES**

Like anyone facing a complicated puzzle, Andrew and I used all of the aids available to us. Our “box top” was the Butrint Foundation’s archive of photographs from the Italian Archaeological Mission’s 1928–1943 work at the site under the leadership of Luigi Maria Ugolini (see article in this issue). These images were supplemented by later photographs taken by the Albanian Institute of Monuments. We were also fortunate to have access to Ugolini’s field notes, which were long thought to have vanished, but had been rediscovered by the Butrint Foundation scattered throughout various archives in Italy and Albania. Reading through these notes was like stepping back in time. One could almost feel the...
heat and hear the buzzing of the mosquitoes that plagued the excavators during the summer months.

Our first order of business involved ferreting out and retrieving the information pertinent to the walls and fortifications contained in the Italian Archaeological Mission’s archives. After reviewing this information, the next step was to go through the publications on the walls of Butrint to get an idea of when and where the existing photographs had been taken. Of course, these photos would come to make a lot more sense after the actual field-based survey was underway, but it was helpful to have all of the images in mind while we carried out our work.

Despite the benefits of having the old photographs in hand, nothing could substitute for walking around, touching, and studying the walls themselves. That is when the real sorting of the pieces occurred. With some idea of the different groups (various walls and building campaigns) into which we might organize the available clues, we began to assemble our data. To the notes and photographs we added copies of the general plan of the city that had been established by the IWA (Institute of World Archaeology, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England) from 1994 to 1999 as part of the Butrint Foundation’s investigations at the site. We then set off with a notebook, a tape measure, and a digital camera to record our impressions of the various phases of the walls. Over the course of two weeks, we walked and studied every inch of Butrint’s fortifications.

Although we spent time examining what was believed to be a medieval wall circuit constructed around the lower city and the various refurbishments of the original Hellenistic defenses in this area, we focused primarily on Butrint’s acropolis. Much like the rest of the site, this area included remains from the Hellenistic period (ca. 323–31 BC) through to the 1930s. Fortunately, we had the chance to make one of our first study circuits around the site with Professor Karaiskaj, mentioned above. It was during these trips that we also made many observations concerning the existing preservation of the walls and the potential danger posed by vegetation.

**REASSEMBLING THE PIECES**

Our main goals in studying various sections of the walls were to figure out what the acropolis fortifications actually looked like, how they functioned over time, and how they were approached and defended. In general, we found that the broad construction sequences that had been established by the IWA survey held true, with one major and several minor exceptions. However, as might be expected, our more in-depth study of the walls and fortifications led to a more nuanced view of the complex history of Butrint. One interesting conclusion we reached was that a glacis (a sloping stone wall built to protect the base of a vertical wall) on the northern side of the citadel, which was one of the key walls for any argument concerning the Venetian works at the site (ca. AD 1386–1797), turned out to have been constructed by Ugolini and his team. In this case and others, where we were able to identify the walls that dated to the 1930s, the collection of photographs from Ugolini’s expedition proved indispensable. An example of their usefulness is provided by the pictures of the castle’s main tower. This is especially true because, as Ugolini himself noted, the workmen did their best to match both the stones and building style of the original when they rebuilt various walls.

As a result of our survey, we were able to add details to the general history of the walls, and we now know that what was considered a “simple” medieval castle and fortification system was actually quite complex. For example, projecting towers were spaced irregularly around the circumference of the walls. That they were part of the original construction plans was indicated by the fact that they were keyed into the portions of walls nearby. We also discovered multiple gates in the acropolis wall located next to towers that we identified. However, no evidence of entrances through the towers themselves could be found. In almost all cases, the pieces that would have provided this evidence were completely missing, and we were left with only Ugolini’s notes indicating that he thought such entrances existed. Only future excavation has the potential to provide this information and definitely lay the issue to rest.

We also learned something interesting about one of the mysteries of these walls. Previous attempts to explain the apparent variations in construction style within phase I of the medieval city walls, which were thought to have been constructed sometime in the 13th century (although more recent discoveries point to the possibility of an 11th century intervention), have proposed that these were due to differences in the “personal” style of various work gangs. It was therefore assumed that places where different styles of masonry joined along a wall were simply areas where two construction gangs
Our work showed that the variety in style might further be explained by the incorporation of recycled building materials—sometimes more carefully cut and of higher quality—which were reassembled into the acropolis wall in those areas. Our study suggested that there may have been some clearance work associated with the building of these walls and that the builders were reluctant to let any of the dismantled materials go to waste. What is more, in a few cases along the northern wall, the edges of older, reused foundations seemed to stick out from underneath. To confuse the issue even further, we also discovered what appeared to be numerous patching and repair jobs that had been carried out on the walls over the centuries, perhaps in response to damage inflicted by severe weather or earthquakes. Below the acropolis, the picture that emerged was one in which the medieval walls enclosing the lower city were a mix of segments built on top of the late Roman circuit and original constructions.

No pre-medieval defenses encircled the acropolis, as had been previously assumed. The acropolis wall circuit, castle bailey, and outworks were constructed during the Medieval Phase I building program (13th, possibly 11th century AD). Although only one tower exists today, a second tower, only apparent in a series of photographs from the 1930s (see photograph on page 22), also guarded the eastern edge (and possible entrance) of the enclosure. From the photographs, it appears that this arrangement was similar to the castellan’s residence at Agirokastro on the island of Corfu. Once established, with few exceptions, this layout was not drastically altered. The Phase I walls were, however, substantially repaired during the Medieval Phase II building program. In a few cases they were wholly rebuilt in what appeared to be an attempt to reorganize or restrict access to the acropolis and castle. The Phase II repairs and additions are hard to pin down chronologically, but the overall impression one gets of “battening down the hatches” suggests the rule of the Epirote Despot Michael II (AD 1230–1266) and the period of Angevin rule in the late 13th and 14th centuries as likely candidates. Charles of Anjou took the title of King of Albania in February of 1272, and the Regnum Albaniae lasted until 1368 as a dependency of the Kingdom of Sicily. During this period, Butrint changed hands multiple times. The extent of the work carried out on the defenses also fits with new rulers at Butrint who would have come in and redesigned, or more likely re-fortified, their new property. Later patchwork and repairs must be those mentioned in documents from the Venetian archives. Interestingly, the same archives indicate that a medieval labor struggle was taking place related to whether local Albanians or Corfiotes were to man these fortifications. It appears that the Corfiotes won out, as a 1454 document mentions that they used great valor in defending Butrint from a siege by 10,000 Turks led by Caniz Zibe.

The later acropolis castle included a lower, subsidiary enclosure, which was reinforced and made more complex along the western side. The gateway leading up to the acropolis, located off the northwest corner of the castle, was formidably strengthened at this point. Those responsible for the Phase II walls also restructured and severely limited the access to the citadel by funneling everyone along the western side of the hilltop and clockwise around the northwest corner. At the same time, they closed off all of the other gates in the acropolis wall built during the Medieval Phase I fortification of the promontory.
The results of our survey, combined with continuing research conducted by the Butrint Foundation, suggest that the main phases of the Butrint castle did not begin with a Hellenistic, or even a Byzantine, walled citadel as previously thought. Instead, they began with a poorly preserved later castrum or fortress (13th, possibly 11th century AD) at the west end of the acropolis. This was part of the major wall-building program that we have labeled Medieval Phase I. Access to the acropolis seems to have been quite open during this phase with a possible major entrance located along the southern acropolis wall. This fortification system was strengthened during the 13th to 14th centuries as part of an effort that reconfigured the access routes to the acropolis and closed off the northern area of the promontory as well as any direct passages between this area and the acropolis. Rather than a third phase of construction during the 16th century under the Venetians, as originally assumed, the citadel, it now appears, was actually deserted during this period in favor of a Venetian tower and triangular castle on the northern and southern sides of the Vivari Channel, respectively. The triangular castle was strengthened in the 18th century and became the center of an Ottoman settlement in the early 19th century. In the end, this more general picture of continual demographic change in and around Butrint matches the image that is emerging of the pre-medieval city from more targeted excavations being carried out around the area of the Roman forum and on the Vrina Plain. Throughout its history, the city inhabitants reconfigured, re-planned, and restructured access to Butrint and its environs to meet contemporary challenges, just as those who have recently taken the city under their care continue to do today.

James G. Schryver is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Over the last 13 years, he has led or participated in archaeological excavations around the Mediterranean and in Ireland. He assures us that he still loves puzzles.

For Further Reading


Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Butrint Foundation for their invitation and assistance on site and the Venetian Heritage Inc. and Packard Humanities Institute for funding this study. The main archaeological assessment was made from May 12 to May 29, 2004. Further archival research was conducted by the author during the summer of 2006. The principal investigators were Andrew Crowson (Institute of World Archaeology [IWA], UEA, Norwich, UK) and James G. Schryver (University of Minnesota, Morris). Crowson and Schryver were aided by Matthew Logue (National University of Ireland [NUJ] – Galway). They were supported by Professor Richard Hodges (Scientific Director, Butrint Foundation) and Professor Gjerak Karaiskaj (Director, now retired, Institute of Monuments, Albania). The team was assisted by Nevila Molla (IWA).