For those interested in past civilizations, archaeological sites have a special value based on the physical connection that they provide with these civilizations. For others, they may have financial, political, or some other value. Richard Hodges’ article on Nikita Khrushchev in this issue shows us that, in the latter half of the 20th century, the value of Butrint depended heavily on who the viewer was. For Enver Hoxha’s post-World War II communist regime, it was a link between his modern nation of Albania and the great Ilyrian civilization of the past. For Khrushchev, the historical value of the site was nowhere near as great as its potential for use as a Soviet submarine base. These different views of Butrint may not surprise us today, when we are all too conscious of the fact that we bring our own agendas with us when we attempt to experience or re-create the past. What they may lead us to ask, however, is whether or not similar agendas were at work when the site was originally excavated, viewed, and presented to a broader public by its Italian excavator, Luigi Maria Ugolini. A cursory look at Ugolini’s many publications soon shows that, for him at least, Butrint meant much more than the sum of its archaeological discoveries.

At a regional level, Ugolini’s work at Butrint, and indeed in Albania in general, was carried out against the backdrop of an Italian government wishing to counter what they saw as increasing French influence within the kingdom. At a more individual level, Ugolini saw himself as simply deepening Italy’s special scholarly relationship with Albania and continuing the explorations of a long line of archaeologists and other scholars that stretched (in his view) all the way back to Ciriaco d’Ancona’s visit of 1435. In his more general surveys of the country in the 1920s, Ugolini specifically avoided spending large amounts of time in central Albania, which he declared was the one part of the country that had been adequately studied. Although, in particular, he was interested in sites connected with the “noble Illirica gens” (the ancient inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula), he was far from indifferent toward the evidence for the improvements made to ancient Albania.
by the Roman Empire. These interests, and the connection that he saw with the description of Aeneas’ two-day visit there in *The Aeneid*, were what ultimately brought him to work at Butrint.

In 1937, a popular version of his official Butrint excavation reports was published posthumously (Ugolini died at age 41, October 4, 1936, in Bologna). In an interesting parallel to some of Khrushchev’s later words about the site, the foreword of this most-read of Ugolini’s books —*Butrinto: Il Mito d’Enea* (1937)—mentions specifically that Mussolini, *il Capo*, requested that Ugolini write it, because “it is the people who pay for our studies with their sacrifice, and who therefore have the most right of all to enjoy the results.” What Ugolini presented was the story of a city tightly linked to both ancient Troy and ancient Rome. It was modeled after the former and became the model for the latter. As such, it was also connected to Mussolini’s Fascist Italy of the present day, an Italy that was proudly celebrating the 2,000-year anniversary of the emperor Augustus. For those excavating at Butrint (and by association those reading about it), their work at this “Colonia Augusta,” this second Troy, was not only a matter of archaeological and historical significance, but one of national pride.

It was with this pride that Ugolini presented his work to the Italian public. In the opening pages of the text, he noted that, from the beginning, Butrint and its environs had promised not only the best chance for the discovery of evidence of Greek or Corinthian colonization, but also of the benefits of its long domination by ancient Rome. That it was the new Rome that was going to once again reveal the glory of these remains to the world after they had been lost is also clear, and Ugolini’s description of finding the site in 1924 includes a dark wood full of wild animals that reminds one of Dante’s *selva oscura*.

It was only four years later, in the spring of 1928, that Ugolini was able to realize his desire to work at Butrint. He arrived with his small team by boat, just like Aeneas, and while waiting nearby for the wind and waters to calm for the final leg of the journey, he passed the time re-reading Virgil’s poem. Numerous dangers and difficulties awaited the team once they reached the site, but none of these deterred them or dampened their enthusiasm. Not only was the site itself quite wild, but even the procurement of provisions proved difficult, with the trip to Santi Quaranta (modern Saranda), the nearest town, often taking a day and a half to complete. Luckily, thanks to the previous work of 20th century Italian military engineers, a source of potable water could be found as close as four hours away. And in his own drainage, earthmoving, and hydraulic works at the site, Ugolini emulated the ancient architect of Butrint’s Roman aqueduct, the remains of which ran across the Vrina Plain. Perhaps most symbolically, he mentions that the site was covered with abundant stands of bay laurel or *laureus nobilis*, almost as if they were marking it. Ugolini mused whether these and others he had seen at other archaeological sites were the descendents of ancient forebearers.

In the end, his report was an engaging mix of scientific description and analysis, exploration narrative (including a description of the flora, fauna, and inhabitants of the region) that would not be out of place in the pages of *National Geographic Magazine*, and a celebration of the Italian accomplishments at Butrint, both past and more recent.

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**For Further Reading**


