

“Butrint: The Stunning Ancient Albanian City You’ve Probably Never Heard Of!”

Talk by Edwina Cole, October 2024

The HADs 2024/25 winter programme of talks kicked-off with our own Edwina Cole telling us about a trip she made to Butrint; a place that made a very deep impression on her.

Butrint is one of four UNESCO World Heritage sites in Albania and is located in the south of the country. Lake Butrint is a source of fresh water and it is easy to understand the area’s attraction for early settlers, and evidence of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement has been found. Butrint’s long golden age began when it became the site of a Greek “polis” which later had a Roman city built on top of it. Later still, Butrint became a religious centre and each period has left its mark.

In the 1920s Albania was under the control of Fascist Italy and Butrint was subject to extensive archaeological excavations for the first time. This led to the discovery of much of the Hellenistic and Roman parts of the city including the 4th century BC “Lion Gate”, named after a carving of a lion attacking a bull. The gate is extremely low, probably for defensive reasons. Archaeology also found evidence of trading links throughout the Mediterranean area.

Other remainders of the Greek period include the theatre, dating from the 3rd century BC and probably abandoned in late antiquity, a nearby temple, enlarged in the 2nd century AD and the Asclepian Treasury with a gate built into city wall. It is thought this is where pilgrims entered the city to access the shrine of Asclepiu, the Greek god of medicine.

The settlement seems to have been quite liberal for its time. Women were allowed to own and release slaves (unusual in ancient Greece) and, if a man died, everything went to his widow, not his eldest son.

In Roman times, Julius Caesar founded a colony at Butrint and a forum was constructed. The Romans were attracted by the natural resources; the site being in a good position for a commercial activity and also provided a natural harbour for the Roman Navy. Roman citizens seem to have had a good standard of living, with fine glass and tableware.

The Romans built an aqueduct in the 2nd century AD, connecting Butrint to the Vrina plain. Butrint was the site of many fountains, including Nymphem with its marble statues dating from the 1st to 2nd century AD. There were many public baths. All the signs point to it being a prosperous city.

In later Roman times, during the Byzantine period, a town house was built that was later expanded and became the Triconch Palace. For some reason the palace was later abandoned and partially demolished.

Butrint is also the site of many early Christian buildings and was the seat of a bishop. The Great Basilica, dating from the 6th century, was the main church and contains a mosaic floor. Of similar vintage is the circular Baptistery (built on the site of a Roman bathhouse) with a magnificent mosaic floor (covered over for protection). At the time baptisms could only take place on Easter Sunday.

There followed a long period of which little is known although some church building took place in the 9th century. However, by the 13th century, the site appears to have been prospering with more church building and the resumption of trading links. The whole site was eventually purchased by Venice in 1386 although this led to a period of decline as Venetian merchants were more interested

in trading with nearby Corfu. The whole complex fell into the hands of local Ottoman despot Ali Pasha in the late 18th century although by that time it had been unoccupied for centuries.

The site was eventually brought out of obscurity by the work of Italian archaeologists between the wars. Although they were working for Mussolini's fascist regime, they appear to have worked professionally. In the post-war period, Albania became a very secretive communist state, although a museum to display artefacts discovered by the pre-war archaeologists was opened in 1955.

Albania remains a poor country and is only just opening up to tourists. However, the site can be reached by ferry and road from Corfu although a one day visit is probably not enough.

On a serious note, the site is in grave danger from climate change and is predicted to be largely underwater by 2040. Understandably plans are in place to try to prevent this happening.

Thank you Edwina for telling us about yet another place to go on the "bucket list"!



The Great Basilica at Butrint

Alan Sandford

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