

## **Butrint continues to tell its story**

by Dhimosten Budina

One of the oldest and most picturesque cities of our country, the city of Butrint, flourished some twenty-five centuries ago. It was situated in a very favourable geographical position on a beautiful hill on the Ksamili peninsula in the Saranda district (in the southernmost corner of Albania). Its former grandeur is evident in its ancient centuries-old ruins. A long time ago an entire city prospered on the sides and at the foot of this hill. Its inhabitants lived, built and fought for centuries in succession.

The earliest archaeological excavations were begun here in 1928 by an Italian archaeological mission. The Italian Government had been granted, at that time, a concession by King Zog's anti-people Government to undertake archaeological excavations in Butrint and its surroundings. Foreign archaeologists unearthed part of the city and brought to light architectural and artistic monuments of very great value. But most of these archaeological objects were taken overseas and never brought back.

With the liberation of the country all foreign concessions were liquidated in Albania together with the concessions of the Italian archaeological mission. Our Government proclaimed Butrint a national monument of major cultural importance. As such it is protected by law and by the State which is constantly concerned about the protection and restoration of the monuments discovered. A scientific archaeological unit has been set up there in recent years for carrying out systematic excavation during most of the year.

Today, Butrint is not only a scientific centre but also a tourist and health resort for the workers of the country. This important archaeological centre is visited also by many delegations from various countries of the world. In their impressions different visitors have said very good words about the care taken in our country of these archaeological findings.

The early traces of life in this city take us back to the first thousand years before our era, but at this stage it is not yet a big city centre. Several archaeological objects and a wall on the hilltop built of blocks of stone slightly hewed and placed on each other without mortar belong to this period. It was during the 8th century before our era that the city assumed the features of a true city of antiquity.

The most ancient structures of Butrint are the surrounding walls of the city built of huge blocks of stone hewed carefully into various shapes such as polygons or parallelepipeds. These gigantic fortification structures were equipped with turrets and portals through which entrance was made into the city. Five portals have been discovered so far in Butrint.

Within these walls most of the dwelling houses and public buildings have been built. Among the latter the theatre stands out which is not very large but beautiful and kept well in its lower part.

The most beautiful and important monument of the first Byzantine period discovered in Butrint is the baptistery. In itself this hall was an ancient building of the 4th century of the new era. Later on, towards the end of the 5th century it was turned into a baptistery. The floor of this hall is laid with a beautiful multi-coloured mosaic divided into seven parts in the form of concentric circles. Five of these parts are decked with geometrical and vegetative motifs while the other two parts with 84 medallions within which are portrayed images of animals and, especially, birds.

Work done these recent years under the direction of the archaeological scientific nucleus has shown that Butrint will continue to speak. By the recent excavations on the eastern side of the hill and west of the portal with a turret there were found two well deposited cultural layers which, according to

discoveries have a continuity of time from one period to another, namely, a mediaeval layer represented by the remnants of a dwelling building, a second layer of the period of later antiquity formed by remnants of the environment and other discoveries and, finally, another thicker layer represented by the ruins of dwelling houses and different other findings of which we can now say date back to the 2nd century of the new era.

With a view to studying the system of fortifications and to completing its plan, excavations have also been carried out along the surrounding wall of the city. Hundred metres, have been dug so far and its thickness is 3.5 metres. The wall has two sides built of blocks of limestone. The principal formations of the hill of Butrint are also of these stones which leads to the conclusion that these blocks have been dug from this hill which have been hewed and placed on the wall by native craftsmen. Stones placed lengthwise are followed by others placed transversally. This technique is widely used in Illyrian-Epirotic fortifications of the time.

An important part of the great archaeological heritage discovered in the ancient city of Butrint are the inscriptions. This year, while digging the second surrounding wall of the city, on its western corner, there were discovered also 36 decrees. These inscriptions, just as those discovered 40 years ago at the theatre of Butrint, are hewed on the frontal side of the blocks which later added to the surrounding wall. As it turns out from their preliminary reading these decrees are licenses granted to slaves. All these licences bear the name of the chief priest of the Temple Aslep. In the lists of the decrees there are also Illyrian names. According to the kind of letters and their content, it seems that the inscriptions on the platform of the surrounding wall have begun to be carved towards the end of the 3rd century of the new era and have continued not later than 148 before the new era.

Cultural stratigraphic data as well as the characteristics of construction go a long way to confirming the opinion that the city has led an active life and for a long time, which is rarely met with in other ancient cities. The activity of this city, at least as far as the excavations go to show, is much bigger and broader during the period from the 2nd to the 4th century of the new era and keeps waning in the subsequent centuries. This is observed both in the better technique of construction as well as in the many and variegated relics belonging to this period and the period before it.

The rich ceramic material, the various achievements and especially the inscriptions discovered in recent excavations constitute a powerful basis and convincing material for the study of the social life, of its continuity and evolution during many centuries in the ancient city of Butrint. These data added to the other materials unearthed by the former excavations at Butrint and the surrounding regions are a further proof of the Illyrian affiliations of the Epirotic tribes which include also Butrint and its surrounding districts.

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[A few alterations have been made to the original article to correct obvious errors in translation but this story is substantially as it was first published in 1977.]