Report
Summer 2012 Archaeology Field School,
Vrina Plain, Butrint, Albania

August 2012
This report undertakes to represent the work of Albanian Heritage Foundation in the frame of its Butrint Training School (BTS), carried out with financial support from the Packard Humanities Institute and the Butrint Foundation. BTS has been an essential element of the archaeological excavations of the Vrina Plain, Butrint, for a long period now, providing a constant flow of new potential archaeologists and at the very least giving Albanian university students the opportunity to take part in the sort of field project not common elsewhere in the country. Such field schools are an essential complement to conventional classroom based teaching, inculcating a sense of teamwork, transferable skills, discipline and a work ethic, in addition to the practical benefit of learning archaeological techniques in the field.

The report has been prepared by: Ilir Parangoni and Oliver Gilkes


Front-cover: Students carrying out the excavation at villa rustica

Back-cover: BTS 2012 participants

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1- INTRODUCTION

The Butrint Training School sponsored by Packard Humanities Institute and the Butrint Foundation has successfully concluded its 2012 season. It took place between 1-21 July 2012 and consisted of three weeks of intensive excavation and post-excavation work at the Roman and later period settlement on Vrina Plain, southern Albania.

The 2012 Field School participants included Albanian students of history department from the universities of Tirana, Elbasan, Gjirokastra, Prishtina, as well as students from other disciplines such as Architecture and Urban Planning from Polis University. This season for the first time in the BTS we had some visiting students from New York University in Tirana from the departments of Law and International Relations. Again thanks to an on-going fruitful collaboration with the American University of Rome (AUR), three international students participated in the training excavation programme.

As in previous years, the programme provided training for university students in archaeological field methods and conservation practices. The training excavation was devised and delivered in accordance with the “EAA Code of Practice for Fieldwork Training” (2000). It covered a variety of areas focused on the following activities: health and safety in field archaeology, elementary surveying techniques including theodolite and level, excavation techniques, stratigraphic recording systems, archeological draughtsmanship, processing and recording of archeological artifacts and introduction to the post-excavation process. The field practice was held in the Roman suburb of Butrint, on the Vrina Plain where a villa complex has recently been discovered (Fig. 1). (see below, the excavation report).

Fig. 1 Students during final cleaning of the villa rustica

Parallel to the excavation training, for the third constitutive year, the Albanian Heritage Foundation in collaboration with the Archaeological Service Agency (ASA), the Butrint National Park (BNP), and the Butrint Foundation organized another course on conservation of archaeological

1 http://www.e-a-a.org/codef.htm
sites and monuments. The field practice was held on the eastern part of the city walls (Fig. 2) (for more see the conservation report, Hakani forthcoming).

Fig. 2 Conservation students during practice

As part of the programme a series of lectures were delivered by different specialists and professors. Important to this was the involvement of Prof. Neritan Ceka and his lectures on antique fortifications in northern Epirus and Butrint, Dr. Valerie Higgins regarding the collaboration of AUR with the Butrint Training School and villas architecture in Italy, Prof. Luan Përzhita on the excavations in Diaporit, the Director of the Butrint National Park Rajmond Kola about the management issues of the Butrint National Park and Giulio Marchetti on the international legislation of cultural heritage.

Furthermore, several educational trips were made to archaeological and cultural heritage sites in the regions of Saranda and Gjirokastra (Fig. 3) providing participants with firsthand experience related to the topic or concept being discussed in the programme.

Fig. 3 Visit to Hadrianopolis, Gjirokastra
2- 2012 FIELD RESEARCH AND RESULTS

2.1 Objective and aims

The overall objective of this research is to attempt to clarify the nature of Roman villas in this area of ancient Epirus. Several complexes have been uncovered and examined through previous projects undertaken by the Butrint Foundation, but the sequences were largely concerned with the Pars Urbana. In keeping with the research objectives, the overarching aim is to sample as wide a range of activities as possible in order to obtain an overview of a more typical villa complex.

Previous seasons of excavation on the Vrina Plain have revealed a remarkable sequence of settlement ranging from sparse Hellenistic occupation, through levels of the Augustan, colonial era and into the Roman, Late Antique and Medieval periods. The recent work (2009-2011) has focused on a Roman villa complex at the eastern end of the plain (Fig. 4).

A geophysical survey carried out during the 1990s by Bescoby revealed a whole series of anomalies in this location that have been investigated by trial trenching and excavation. The initial interpretation was of a whole series of buildings with a formal entrance to the south fed by a possible road. The excavation work undertaken since 2009 has sustained this hypothesis in general, though the details have been considerably revised and several structures can now be seen to have entirely different functions than originally supposed. This then has been an interesting test of the geophysical survey in its own right.

The excavations of the past three years on the Vrina Plain have focused on a single complex of buildings. During this time, data was gathered for different phases of assorted buildings within the complex, however this proved insufficient to complete the sequence, specifically that of the villa rustica and the so-called substantial building. Therefore it was planned that these elements would be the focus of the 2012 excavation season, along with addressing a fuller understanding of the phasing and functions of both areas. Based on these objectives the 2012 excavation season aimed to:

**Firstly:** Complete the excavation of the agricultural building and define its form along with its sequence. This necessitated an extension to the south of the agricultural building, intending to see whether there is an agricultural storage area to the south (a ‘dolium yard’) as would be expected in other villas of this type elsewhere in the Mediterranean; and to expose the total area of the wine production facility,

**Secondly:** Uncover for a final time and complete the recording of the large ‘foundation’ area, which functioned as a funerary structure and was first exposed in 2010. This would only require a small amount of excavation and the full documentation of its upper surface.

**Thirdly:** Provide a properly managed training excavation opened to archaeology students (both national and international), architects and interested amateurs.

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Fig. 4 View of the roman villa site on eastern part of the Vrina Plain
2.2 Methodology

The results of previous excavations in the villa area revealed a not entirely clear form of the building. Further archaeological sequences between the villa rustica and the rest of the complex remained unclear. Therefore, to reach a final definition of the building shape, the previous excavation area was expanded to the south (Fig. 5).

As part of this season’s investigation, the opening of a new test-trench to the south was also planned. It was decided that it would be opened with references to the geophysics evidence, not far from the new trench extension. But, as a result of identifying the main form of the building, this trench was never opened. Furthermore, due to lack of time some of the rooms revealed during this season, located in the southern and eastern parts of the building, were not fully excavated. It was decided to only identify their wall tops in order to understand their forms and variations.

On the other hand, the western structure that might be a mausoleum was re-opened and underwent a careful cleaning with trowels to better define its surface. Further, the entire surface was graphically recorded by photography and measured drawings.
At the end, in accordance with the contract with the responsible institutions, the area excavated during these seasons has been completely backfilled. All the structures (comprising the western mausoleum and the villa rustica) have been finally backfilled (Fig. 6). The finds were stored at the Butrint National Park, while a copy of the entire documentation of this season is being prepared to hand over to the Institute of Archaeology.

**Fig. 6 The site after backfilling**

2.3 Results

The 2012 excavation season has added considerable material evidence to our understanding of form and especially to the archaeological sequence of the villa in the Vrina Plain. As a result of the south-east extension, it was possible to identify most of the villa rustica structures. It is now clear that the site underwent a series of remarkable transformations during the course of its existence, changing from a regular villa complex, with a probable pars urbana and rustica to then becoming a funerary cult centre. Based on the previous seasons’ results and on a preliminary study of the data this year, these phases are set out below:

2.3.1 The Villa

This villa was founded in the later first century AD, and then developed during the second century AD. Its final form at this time was as an agricultural complex, a pars rustica, located along the south and east, with a pars urbana then situated towards the east and to the north, as represented by a bathhouse close to where the original shoreline of the period would have been (Fig. 9). This latter interpretation is partly speculative based primarily upon the presence of the bathhouse identified during previous excavations, but also through a series of anomalies on the geophysics plot for this area of the Plain. Certainly the zone north of the communist drainage ditch would have been an ideal position for this, as during the Roman period this would have been in proximity to the open water of the lake and afforded a fine view to that direction.
2.3.2 The funerary cult

In the early third century AD the first of two mausolea were erected. The first was a small temple style mausoleum, excavated between 2009 and 2010, which seems to have been supplemented, (although the relationship between the two is not entirely clear), by a second structure to the west, initially identified in the 2010 season of excavations. This later creation comprised a massive monolithic podium clearly intended to support a considerable superstructure. At its western end was a roughly paved area with uneven flagstones, which may represent a cult area, while the eastern part was made up of large stones, set on edge, and bonded with mortar providing a thick foundation.

During the 2012 season, the eastern part of this surface was cleaned and disarticulated human remains were retrieved, possibly indicating a tomb within the stone foundation. In the same area in 2011, a gold Solidus was discovered, however, further examination indicated that if this had been a tomb, it had largely been destroyed by later robbing.

During same phase and following a period of agricultural use, the villa rustica building was modified to reflect the insertion of the funerary monuments. Its north-facing portico was blocked and a wine pressing system inserted into the interior. This facility, the earliest such found in Albania, comprised a shallow pressing room, to be used for the manual treading of the grapes and, a settling tank reached via a tubulus through the wall dividing the two areas. The discovery of the lower part of a marble statuette of Dionysius flanked by a panther, used as a spolia during the period post-dating the wine press, is an interesting sidelight on the type of cult associated with wine making.

Overall the erection of the Mausolea and the associated alterations to the villa rustica, restricting visual and physical access to the central burial area, might point to the presence of a funerary cult within this complex. Other cases of Roman villas modified to reflect a special emphasis on family funerary cults are known, with the best example being at the Villa of Maxentius on the Appian Way in Rome, with its funeral focus on the wife of Herodes Atticus. A further example can be seen at the Mola di Monte Gelato, to the north of Rome, which was owned by a libertas from the city of Veii and with a prominent tower tomb visible room and dominating the villa itself. In these complexes, families great and small celebrated the establishment of their dynasty and the construction of associated tombs was a sign of confidence for the future. It is possible that the Vrina Plain villa complex could be seen in similar terms.

2.3.3 The villa rustica

The agricultural building excavated this year represents an interesting construction rarely seen in Albania. Starting as a simple rectangular structure with an entrance and portico to the north, it was gradually converted and subdivided by the insertion of walls and other internal features to produce a series of rooms. A southern extension along with a portico was added later and considerable internal reorganisation was carried out. The information gained during this season made it possible to identify the following sequence:
Phase 1

Comprises the original rectangular structure of the agricultural building, with an entrance to the north and dates to some point in the mid-late first century AD (Fig. 7). While a number of colonial period coins were found during the excavation, and what appears to be a layer of levelling was reached, there was no sign of any Augustan or colonial period buildings in the 2012 excavated area.

The building was seemingly constructed in the local style, with dwarf walls of mortared masonry with upper levels being made of cob, mud brick and perhaps timber. The communist levelling of the plain in the 1960s and 70s had produced a uniformly level surface and this operation must have been responsible for the redistribution of much of the material from buildings of this sort.

Fig. 7 Plan of the villa rustica with phases
Phase 2

During the late second and early third century AD the building was used largely for agricultural purposes. A subdivision was inserted to support a mezzanine floor at the east end. The internal pilasters and subdivisions in the big building were reinforced with further additions creating a more structured space and probably also helping support a possible sagging upper storey.

Phase 3

During this phase, there were further subdivisions of the interior to create a series of internal rooms. This may have occurred sometime in the later second or early third century AD.

Phase 4

This includes the blocking of the northern portico and entrance, the addition of further internal; walls and the creation of the wine processing facility in the form of a pressing floor and settling tank in the early third century AD. It has been suggested that the closing off of the building on its northern side occurred either at the same time or just after the construction of the mausoleum to the north. Clearly the *villa rustica* remained functional despite the alterations to the building and the complex as a whole. The wine processing works may have been a new creation, although it is possible that it might have replaced an earlier such facility. The process was non-mechanical and the grapes were crushed by human agency on an angled treading floor which occupied the whole of one of the rooms. This floor was made of a heavy, rough *cocciopesto* foundation over-lined with a much finer mortar surface of *opus signinum* that continued up the sides of the room walls for c. 0.25 m for waterproofing and to allow deep treading of grapes. It was noticeable that the higher end of the floor was heavily worn while the lower part retained its upper, finer mortar, surface intact. The floor was tilted to an angle of c. 15 degrees east to west, thereby permitting the grape juice to pass downwards and collect at the lower end of the room where it would flow through a *tubulus* and possible filter into a settling tank (Fig. 8). This tank was again of solid construction with a shallow circular depression in the bottom, presumably to permit sediment to settle before the wine was decanted.

The treading surface was connected to the long room to the north through a small doorway that had been deliberately left or cut into the wall. This long room seems to have acted as a storage area with at least one *dolium* emplaced in the floor, the remains of which were still *in situ*. It is possible that grapes awaiting pressing were kept here, or perhaps the final product of the pressing. The numerous fragments of *dolia* found in the excavations again suggest production at this facility. Many broken fragments of these large jars were commonly used as material in the various walls of the building.

The non-mechanical nature of the process is reminiscent of the wine manufacture in the ancient eastern Mediterranean and differs markedly from the far more intense and mechanised viticulture of Italy and North Africa. The entire complex at Vrina gives the impression of localised small-scale production and may of course be associated with whichever funerary cult was occurring.
Phase 5

The building underwent further internal subdivision into the fourth century AD. This is more visible in Room C where an *insitu dolium* was found.

Phase 6

The building was partially abandoned, coinciding with its first use as a burial ground. This probably happened towards the end of the fourth century AD to the early fifth century AD.

Phase 7

Starting from the mid-fifth century AD, the building had a series of collapse and demolition or robbing phases while at the same time was being used again as a burial grounds. These graves appear to be a second, more intense phase of burials that were cut from a higher level than those identified in Phase 6. It is clear that many of the *villa rustica’s* walls had been largely buried and were not visible during this process, as a number of graves cut through earlier walls (Fig. 9). The nature of the burials, which were far more prevalent in the southern part of the site than the north, is intriguing. The eastern mausoleum was found to be completely filled with burials which had also been placed in proximity to the exterior of the building. The western mausoleum, if that is what the vast foundation actually is, may have had only one central burial chamber, which was perhaps reused several times.
While the two *mausolea* were probably tombs specifically designed for family use, the burials over the *villa rustica* suggest a different intent. Physically and temporally separated from the *mausolea* and clearly continuing after the building had collapsed, this extended series of burials suggests the continuance of a small community in the vicinity well into the sixth century AD. Given the later medieval evidence for a high-status settlement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, possibly associated with a church as demonstrated by ecclesiastical metalwork finds from 2009 and 2010, it is not impossible that a late-antique basilica connected with the villa complex existed in proximity to the *villa rustica*. These burials would therefore represent the community that was using such a religious site. If this could be verified it would be an interesting example of a local population shifting its burial strategy from pagan to Christian monuments. However, in the absence of physical evidence it remains a suggestive, but as yet unproven hypothesis.

**Phase 8**

The entire complex seems to have been abandoned after the sixth century AD. No further burials were found and there is a complete absence of the thick black horizons associated with medieval activity, previously observed to the north. The site was eventually covered by the processes that gave rise to the Vrina Plain after the thirteenth century and was finally levelled by the State during the 1960s. Several distinct lines of plough ruts or pan busting ploughs were seen running north-west to south-east across the site.
2.3.4 Conclusions

The Villa complex seems to have been built as a working economic unit in the late first century AD. During the second century AD it was largely used for agricultural purposes, where the agricultural building underwent several interior subdivisions with a possible mezzanine floor at the eastern end.

In the third century AD the construction of two substantial mausolea and various alterations suggest that the villa, while remaining a working unit, probably began to function as a family funerary cult space too, the wine press may even be associated with this. On the other hand, the creation of a mechanism to produce in more significant quantities than before could be related to growing consumer demands either domestically or beyond. The presence of the villa close to the sea offers up the hypothesis of easy access to export (Fig. 10).

An intriguing phenomenon, however, associated with the end of building occupation is the presence of cemeteries amid its ruins. This is a phenomenon that is documented at many sites villas ranging from Spain to Italy. At some of these villa-cemeteries have small chapels associated with them. If the site fits into a pattern of roman villas during the Late Roman period, it is likely that there will be a late-antique church in proximity to it. The presence of churches during this period would make sense since the same phenomenon occurs in the surrounding area. Thus, the city of Butrint, although surrounded by a wall in the very late fifth or early sixth century, starts to have a large presence of the church buildings. The remains of an earlier Roman villa at Diaporit were used as the site of a new Christian complex, built around 490-500, and following the same change, the

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4 Dyson 2003.
5 Bowden and Përzhita 2004.
villa situated on the west side of aqueduct is transformed into an ecclesiastical settlement as well.\textsuperscript{6} Therefore, if the Villa complex on the eastern part of the Vrian Plain follows the same transformation we probably have the interesting example where a community, which had begun to switch to Christianity, continued to use the villa ruins for spiritual activities even after the site was deserted following nearly five hundred years of occupation.

3- FUTURE STEPS

3.1 Post-excavation

Publication for the villa complex is planned to be in two articles. The first will cover the \textit{mausolea} and bathhouse, accompanied by reports on the ceramics and principal dating evidence for this site. This is intended to be ready by the end of 2012. The second report, ready late 2013, will cover the \textit{villa rustica} and all the other finds reports in summary concluding the process.

The \textit{Annual of the British School at Athens} has expressed interest in publishing the reports, but there will be other journals that will give preliminary consideration to it. The final reports will provide all basic data, but the full details of various analyses will be published as a separate series of articles in appropriate journals.

Further articles will be submitted to Iliria and Monumentet, respectively the journals of the Albanian Institute of Archaeology and Institute of Monuments.

3.2 Future possibilities for the BTS

The Butrint Training School has successfully trained a new generation of young Albanian archaeologists over the last twelve years. Nowadays the programme is running by an Albanian team that has gained abilities and skills to continue the training course. Three years ago the scope was extended to include conservation, in recognition of the complementary role this plays to excavation and the responsibilities of caring for heritage to future generations. The new phase of the Butrint Training School could be built on this and extending the aims further by:

- incorporating public archaeology (intending to actively involve local communities and children in practical archaeological activities through the medium of local schools) and,
- including heritage management instruction within the archaeological and conservation programme.

Furthermore, previous students of the Butrint Training School were predominantly archaeology students from state sector universities with some participation of international students. New projects could continue to service state universities while expanding to include new private sector universities and students of disciplines other than archaeology. In turn, expanding the range of students and, the inclusion of private sector universities would also provide a new revenue base for the project.

\textsuperscript{6} Hodges, further coming.
4- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The excavation would not have taken place without the hard work of the following site and finds assistants, and technicians – thanks are extended to them all: Emilly Glass (University of Bristol), Erjona Qilla (Archaeologist at the Butrint National Park), Helidon Sokoli (Regional Directorate of National Culture in Shkodër), Prof. Paul Reynolds (ICREA, Research Professor, University of Barcelona), Edona Arifi (University of Prishtina) and Klejdi Zguro (Regional Directorate of National Culture in Tirana), Prof. Tom Crist (Utica College) for an ongoing analysis of the human remains, Valbona Hysa (Albanian Institute of Monuments) and Karen Stark (University of London) for her work on the glass finds.

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APPENDIX 1

The Sculpture of Dionysus

Inge Lyse Hansen

Dionysus as an eastern god is often depicted with, or riding on, a panther (or leopard) and the animal here provides a secure attribution. The god is a popular subject for Roman villas and horti, where he highlights the luxurious villa culture, leisured intellectualism and link with a country-side setting.

The god is depicted standing in a relaxed pose as evident in the uneven weight-distribution on the feet and the raised heel of the left foot (Fig. 11). A languid pose is characteristic of Dionysus as the god of wine and fertility. The figure was most likely depicted nude or clad in a pelt and with vine leaves in his hair; he may have held a cup or bunch or grapes in one hand, with the other either holding a thyrsus or drawn up to rest on his head.

![Fig. 11 Bottom part of the Dionysus statue](image)

The panther is depicted seated on its hind legs with the front left paw resting on the head of a hind or ox. The inclusion of a prey highlights the cyclical and salvation aspects of the cult of Dionysus. Carved close to the figure of the god, the panther functioned as a support for the former.

The figure group was probably originally around 0.40+ m in height, and - given the seemingly straight sides of the base - comprised only the two figures and no additional maenad or satyr. It appears fashioned from a single block, and the carving is good with some lively details of the paws of the panther and head of the hind; though the toes and feet of Dionysus are somewhat schematically rendered with a distinct use of the drill.
The grainy honey-colour of the marble may suggest that it is Pentelic. As suggested for in other works in Butrint, this piece may conceivably have been fashioned in an Attic (or Corinthian) workshop. The date of the piece appears to be later imperial -late second century AD onward.

The grouping of a standing Dionysus with a panther is not unusual, and comparisons for this composition can be seen (though note the varying sizes and dates) in a fourth century AD Romano-British statuette in the British Museum, a second century AD group from Pozzuoli now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, and an over life-size group from the Ludovisi Collections now in Palazzo Altemps in Rome (Fig. 12 a-b-c).

Fig. 12 a-b-c Showing examples of standing Dionysus with a panther in (a) British Museum, (b) Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, and (c) Palazzo Altemps in Rome.