

A sense of place



Using the unlikely site of Butrint in Albania as a prime example, **Richard Hodges** explains how the work of archaeologists defines them as placemakers



1. An aerial view of Butrint, on elevated woodland, looking down the Vivari Channel towards the Straits of Corfu.

It was on 1 September 1997 that I accompanied the Director of the Butrint Foundation and the British Ambassador to Albania to meet the country's newly elected Prime Minister, Fatos Nano. Nano had won a handsome majority following a period of civil unrest created by pyramid scheme speculation. The Prime Minister greeted us, and my colleague pitched the plan for an archaeological park at Butrint, ancient *Buthrotum*.

Our foundation had a model in mind, taken from innovative Italian sites. We assumed that Nano would listen and push back against the idea of transforming his country's premier Graeco-Roman site into another institutional entity. After four years of working in post-Communist Albania, it was clear that change in cultural sectors was not easy.

The Prime Minister listened and nodded and said 'Good'. How should we proceed? He was laconic, even gnomic. Then, to our astonishment, he turned to the British Ambassador and offered his condolences for the death of Princess Diana. For the following 15 minutes, scarcely taking a breath, he held forth on her, as though he knew her well. On that September day I doubt that as many as 10 visitors came to Butrint.

Today, 20 years after this meeting with Prime Minister Nano, much has changed. When I visited Butrint last August approximately 3000 to 5000 tourists were ambling around the site. Now, it is Albania's premier destination and, in the cultural heritage law before the new Albanian parliament, it is about to take a new direction, which it claims will be every bit as revolutionary as was taken in Nano's office in 1997.

This is placemaking in archaeology: the practice of either creating or lending a place, ancient or modern, an identity that, with strategic management of the conservation and presentation, attracts visitors whose support helps sustain it, ideally to international standards. Archaeologists (and architects) over the last century have become aware of their role in making places.

Archaeologists discover, excavate selectively and transform the ruins of the past, lending them an identity, and, above all, giving them a

contemporary context, meaning or branding. Think only of the role of Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90) in making Mycenae, or the gargantuan excavations of Giacomo Boni (1859–1925) in the Roman Forum to help shape the new capital of a unified Italy. Placemaking is not new, although the concept is borrowed from late 20th-century postmodern philosophy.

The French philosopher, Marc Augé defines a place as '*an invention: it has been discovered by those who claim it as their own*'. Foundation narratives, he argues, '*bring the spirits of the place together with the first inhabitants in the common adventure of the group... A place is relational, historical and concerned with identity, whereas a non-place is a space which cannot be defined by these criteria*'.

Places are given further value by complex periodic events. These are usually removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Temple cults and, later, the Church, commonly legitimised cultural activities at places.

Supermodernity, on the other hand, produces 'non-place' that, according to Augé, are '*spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which... do not integrate the earlier places*' (which are listed, classified, promoted to the status of '*places of memory*', and assigned to '*a circumscribed and specific position*'). Airports, shopping malls, cinema complexes, hospitals and hotel resorts are fundamentally non-places (although there is a new effort to market them as places). In the concrete reality of today's world, places and non-places are intertwined.

Place and non-place are polarities, together '*the scrambled game of identity and relations*' that is ceaselessly being rewritten. Place, Augé concludes, becomes a refuge to the habitué of non-places. The polarity is not new: place and non-place have existed since prehistory.

The needs of placemaking change with each generation: historical interests, visitor demands and the global market, conservation strategies and administrative strategies alter continuously. Placemaking in archaeology, by necessity, means confronting not only the characteristics of the place today, but



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involves strategic investment in shaping a narrative through excavations, conservation and interpretation of its particular pasts (at Butrint the Greek and Roman have been often favoured over the Medieval and Ottoman) as well as the construction of essential amenities as different as museums and loos. The narrative is not fixed in aspic, nor is it some readily definable off-the-shelf asset. It cannot be reduced to a formula. The idiosyncrasy of past places is why authentic archaeological remains, viewed from different cultural and historical backgrounds, hold infinite interest for the curious, irrespective of education or background.

Not surprisingly, inhabitants of non-places are attracted to places as if they were engaged in pilgrimage. UNESCO World Heritage Sites as a brand connote a social and spatial separation from a normal place of residence or vacation and, invariably, conventional social ties. In such a place, out of time, conventionality is suspended, and there is an assumed relationship with the authentic. Such places and the pilgrimage to them are a rite of passage not just to filling a lifetime bucket list but also to a certain

2. Excavations in 1928 of the Hellenistic and Roman theatre, under Italian archaeologist Luigi Maria Ugolini (1895–1936).

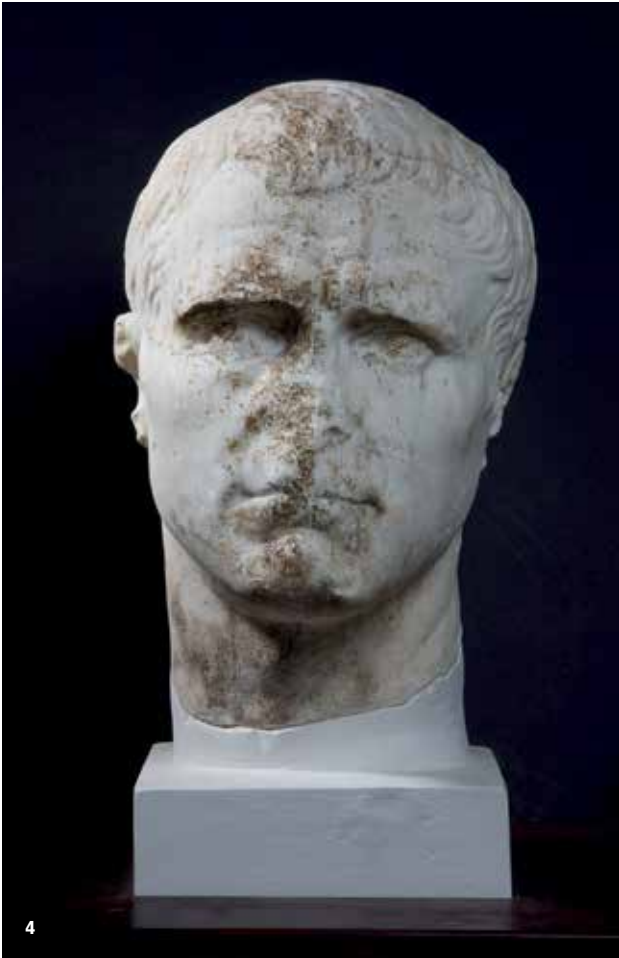
3. A sketch of Ugolini by his friend and Butrint colleague, Igeno Epicoco.



social status. The UNESCO brand has successfully embraced this rite of passage, marketing its sites as globally authentic, essentially meaningful as pilgrimage places

that are safe and relevant to the world today.

Placemaking at Butrint is a good example. The site sits at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, commanding the sea-routes up the Adriatic Sea to the north, across the Mediterranean to the west, and south through the Ionian islands. Like ancient *Dyrrachium* (modern Durrës) some 300km to the north, it also controlled a land-route into the mountainous Balkan interior. The abandoned ancient and medieval port lies 3km inland from the Straits of Corfu in southern Albania (8). At the south of a narrow plain, formerly a marsh, it is separated by the Vivari Channel (1) from a band of hills further south, along which runs the frontier between Albania and Greece established in 1913. The channel leads to Lake Butrint, an inland salt lagoon, and above it mountains



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court in Rome, Virgil was paying personal tribute to the emperor's right-hand man, Agrippa (4), whose first wife, Caecilia Attica, came from Butrint. With such serendipity the port was forever sealed in aspic, at least until our era. Instinctively, the post-war Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha, appreciated this to attract hard currency from controlled tourism, even though he eschewed

Virgil's connection with Butrint in favour of his own historical myths.

For most visitors today Butrint conjures up a different experience. It is the Other, a Mediterranean paradise, a place in a timeless landscape. In a postmodern age it is a shrine to historicism within an exceptional park environment. It is not Disneyesque. Quite the contrary, it is a journey through a

rise to nearly 1000 metres, effectively creating a basin around the ancient city and lake.

The walled city covers an area of about 16 hectares, but surveys on the eastern side of the channel show that in antiquity Butrint covered as much as 25 hectares. The walled city comprises two parts: the acropolis and the lower city. Amongst the urban monuments is a Hellenistic theatre (5), a Roman forum, Roman town houses, a fine cathedral, an exceptional baptistery and a castle, all dotted within thick woodland. The most obvious monument outside the city walls, on the opposite side of the channel, is the well-preserved Triangular Castle, which after 1572 became the nucleus of the early modern settlement. Few places match a range of monuments and natural setting so well.

Butrint is eternal. It owes a priceless debt to Virgil who in his epic poem, *Aeneid*, had his exiled hero from Troy, Aeneas, pause here on the way to found Rome. At a stroke Butrint belonged to a Mediterranean foundation myth. Virgil's choice of Butrint – '*a Troy in miniature*' – was no accident. A member of Augustus's new imperial

4. A bust of Agrippa (63–12 BC), Octavian's general, found during the excavations of the theatre in Butrint.

5. A view of the Hellenistic and Roman theatre today.

6. Archaeologists record the acropolis fortifications at Butrint in 2006.



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7. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev visiting Butrint with the Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha, May 1959.

natural oasis that challenges the homogenisation (non-places) of social space and experience of modern capitalism.

Like Homer and Shakespeare, Virgil has had infinite reach thanks to countless others who have mined his work for one reason or another. Thanks to Virgil's stanzas (he never ventured to this corner of the Mediterranean), Butrint has prospered out of proportion to its importance. Numerous medieval and modern authors briefly described and visited Butrint because of its associations with the epic. Over the centuries visitors have included Casanova, Edward Lear and Lawrence Durrell. None found it came up to their expectations, nor did it impress the Italian archaeologist, Luigi Maria Ugolini (1895–1936) (3).

The ruins of later Roman and medieval monuments rather than Greek ones from the age of the Trojan wars were all that could be readily seen in 1924 when Ugolini landed by boat here. He does not record his disappointment, but this can be tacitly gauged because he decided to devote his archaeological ambitions to another site until 1928. That year Ugolini shrewdly recognised that the 2000-year anniversary of Virgil's birth in 1930 was an opportunity to find Italian government funding for major excavations. He assessed that the promise of funds and Virgil's description made the risk of digging Butrint worthwhile, and

so he began excavations (2) without any clear expectations. Ugolini discovered mostly later Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine remains,

8. Map showing the location of Butrint and the boundaries of the Butrint National Park.



not traces that had any Bronze Age resonance with the world of Virgil's Trojan wars. Finding neither remains of the Mycenaean world, nor great monuments belonging to the epoch of Virgil's patron, the Emperor Augustus, Ugolini nonetheless spun a narrative, tacitly involving Aeneas.

Ugolini and Virgil collaborated, so to speak, to create the identity of an authentic place in a striking landscape setting. No wonder a statue was erected to the Italian archaeologist outside Butrint's first museum in 1938, two years after his death aged 41. Ugolini marketed his results instinctively, and, with little alteration during 50 years of Communist rule (7), his legacy constituted the place granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 1992.

When the Butrint Foundation was established the following year, post-Communist Albania looked set to be overwhelmed by tourist hotel developers eager to seize its coastline and appropriate internationally known places like Butrint.



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For five years this threat menaced the Virgil-Ugolini legacy. The Butrint Foundation was created by Lord Rothschild and Lord Sainsbury (9) in 1993 to protect and preserve Butrint and that same year I joined them. Our simple aim, perhaps presumptuous, was to sustain the *genius loci* – spirit of place, for future visitors, generating tourism and employment, while bringing new archaeological thinking to this time-warped place. With such neo-liberal values, rightly or wrongly, we championed a new episode in placemaking in the long history of Butrint.

Butrint was unforgettable when I first ventured here in 1993, and remains a precious oasis within the growing pains of modern Albania today. On every visit, notwithstanding the circumstances, the glorious assault on one's senses is as powerful as ever. You need know nothing about Aeneas to be seduced by the shimmering reflections off the lagoon, or to fall in love with the shafts of sparkling light filtered by the woodland canopy where butterflies, turtles and golden

9. Butrint's architect, Telemark Llakana (left) talks to Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover, Lord Rothschild and Richard Hodges, in October 1995.

All the images are the property of the Butrint Foundation.

oriel bring any visit vividly to life. Butrint really fits our new global ideals of an authentic UNESCO World Heritage Site. Major excavations by the Foundation (6) between 1998 and 2008 re-defined the archaeological narrative of Butrint. Privileged to operate on a large scale, we were able to chart and document every rich chapter in the city's history since the Bronze Age. Much of this story is now published. We put as much effort into creating a national park supported by the government and UNESCO and regulated through a management plan. A new museum, signage, capacity building in modern conservation practices, a tourist strategy and many other elements were also put in place to bring international and national tourists to this far corner of Albania.

The modern tourist industry is very different from the Virgilian cruise of 1930. Today's tourism begs some fundamental questions. Do modern tourists care about ancient texts, ancient art and architecture? Not at all. Indeed, should they care? Archaeology has slavishly followed the Classical (or historical) tradition in making places, but with the huge boom in global tourism western (Classical) traditions belong to another age. Cultural heritage tourism has moved on, driven by ever-changing popular values, and so has its management

Then there is the issue of identity. Whose identity? For foreign visitors they become grand tourists again. For Albanians it is different. The Communist state had appropriated an identity for Butrint, but today, for the young couples who are getting married here, as for children from local schools, Butrint's tacit packaged (Mediterranean) history in a woodland oasis conjures something almost sacred.

Modern tourism is about consuming goods and services that, in some respects, are unnecessary. They are consumed because they generate pleasurable experiences, different from those

typically encountered in everyday life. When we go on vacation, places have to speak to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that they will do so.

Recognising the huge economic significance of the global tourist industry puts a new responsibility on archaeologists as place-makers. My generation was trained in the humanities, not business or management. We had to pick up management skills on our excavations. In this new age, archaeologists are trying to re-define the profession, caught between discovering and writing world history and the thrust of tourism economists. We are active agents in one of the largest industries in the world, accounting for 9.4 per cent of world GDP and 8.2 per cent of all employment (in 2010). We bear a twin responsibility as archaeologists to reflect on our role as researchers who create development.

Undeniably we were grand tourists of a kind in 1993. Our initial experiences – our first 'gaze' – shaped the (neo-liberal) purposes of the Butrint Foundation. Furthermore, we were visitors to the Other – Balkan and excommunist in culture – carrying our European idea of heritage, with its elitist roots. For sure we were burdened with a kind of colonialism, and yet we created a park that now functions so successfully – bringing nearly 200,000 tourists in 2016 – that its institutions need overhauling to protect its precious ruins and environment.

As a brand, this place remains special in Albania, a flagship in the forthcoming cultural heritage legislation. As such, as post-Communist Albania looks forward, taking the Butrint model of placemaking in terms of management and practice, has become axiomatic to the newly elected government's economic planning. Virgil might be astonished and he would certainly be very proud. ■



• *The Archaeology of Mediterranean Placemaking and Travels with an Archaeologist: Finding a Sense of Place* by Richard Hodges are published by Bloomsbury

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