

## Review

# The aspirations of Albanian archaeology

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*The transition from dictatorship to democracy in Albania [...] is more than a simple*

*mechanical change from one system to another [...]. It is still too early to assess to what extent democratic changes in different areas of life have been adopted. For many reasons Albania will have adopted a similar course to that of the other countries of central Europe, but the Albanian situation has certain peculiarities that need not be detailed here. One thing that is clear is that Albanian society, in regaining its democratic and human identity, has created the conditions needed for integration with dignity into the community of European and human cultures.* (Miraj & Zeqo 1993: 123)

These words, published in the pages of *Antiquity* more than 20 years ago, belie the dark depths into which Albanian archaeologists were plunged with the transition to democracy during 1991–1992. Despite the long bread queues that characterised Albanian life before the Iron Curtain fell, Albanian archaeologists engaged in missions across the country—nearly 50 in 1988. The charmed life of Albania's archaeologists

until 1991 is easily explained. Between 1944 and 1985, the dictator Enver Hoxha invested in archaeology to secure an Illyrian myth for an unstable republic, which, in 1913, was carved out of the western Ottoman Empire. The first generation of communist archaeologists was trained in the Soviet Union; they in turn mentored subsequent generations. As a result, with the advent of democracy, almost no archaeologist had first-hand experience of Western European or American archaeology. The few who had engaged with Western Europe (Neritan Ceka, Aleksander Meksi, Genc Pollo) changed careers and entered politics (Hodges 2014). After the first elections, the 1990s, bearing the bitter scars of communism, were exceedingly confusing and practically complicated for Albania's archaeologists. And yet the Institute of Archaeology has tenaciously held its place in Albanian society, and, under the leadership of the adroit Muzafer Korkuti (Hodges & Bejko 2006), and now Luan Përzhita, there has been a steady direction that can be readily detected in this encyclopaedic volume arising from a conference held during the centenary celebrations of the Republic of Albania.

Akin to any conference proceedings, there is a mixture of strong and weak contributions. Concentrating upon the strengths, it is the diversity of papers, encompassing projects ranging from the Palaeolithic to the medieval periods, that catches the eye. Twenty years ago the archaeology of the Upper Palaeolithic was simply unknown, and medieval archaeology was assumed to be solely devoted to managing the restoration of churches. Indeed, the Illyrians, the traditional fare of the Hoxha epoch are virtually absent from the present volume, except for an elliptical view of their subsequent ethnic history advanced by Neritan Ceka (see below). The other apparent feature of most of the contributions is that modern field methods, principally in excavation but also in field survey, have been adopted and are now considered best practice. A younger generation, trained on foreign missions in Albania as well as

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abroad, has introduced stratigraphic techniques, with single context recording (Hysa & Molla 2009) largely replacing clearance excavations by workmen.

Special place should go to the prehistorians, who have tenaciously assembled a new understanding of the Palaeolithic to Bronze Age periods. Ilir Gjipali charts the story of these investigations from 1998–2013, and contributes to the chapter devoted to the German-Albanian Palaeolithic (GAP) programme. Elegantly illustrated and well researched, it owes much to the influence of the French mission led by Gilles Touchais and his colleagues who have introduced contemporary environmental and economic standards of retrieval to the fieldwork in the Korça region in south-east Albania. Gjipali, with the American archaeologist Susan E. Allen, contributes significantly to the growing understanding of the earliest Neolithic economies in this region. Gjipali and Galaty report on the earliest lithics from the coastal region, augmenting previous studies of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic patterns of settlement and territorial exploitation. By contrast, the Bronze Age contributions are underwhelming, possibly because recently retired Albanian archaeologists such as Korkuti and Prendi made this their bailiwick.

From page 175 onwards, encompassing about 500 pages, there are reports on projects devoted to familiar and less familiar classical sites: Apollonia, Butrint, Byllis, Dimal, Durrës (ancient Dyrrhachium), Hadrianopolis, Lissus, Phoinike, Saranda, Scampis and Shkodra. The hallmark of most of these projects is collaborative partnerships, bringing a new understanding to the topography of antiquity and in some cases the associated material culture. Certain of the essays stand out: Shehi's contribution offers a thoughtful reconstruction the Roman town plan of Dyrrhachium, advancing on a century of scholarship by taking advantage of salvage opportunities after much of the ancient city has been damaged by uncontrolled modern construction. Some of the essays, however, fail to deliver the information that anyone interested in Albania's past is keen to know. The most obvious is the under-illustrated report on the excavations by Santoro and Hoti in the amphitheatre of Dyrrhachium. This monument contains key deposits for understanding the later first millennium AD and certainly the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. The report alludes to these deposits but fails to describe them in any comprehensive way. Exactly the opposite can be said about Hernandez and Çondi's

contribution, dedicated to the deep stratigraphic excavations in the Roman forum at Butrint. Cogently described and illustrated with clear, phased plans, these deep excavations not only help to reconstruct the civic centre of the Roman colony of Butrint, but also provide a reference point for the topography of the preceding late Hellenistic settlement.

As might be expected, there are few bold analytical contributions to these proceedings. Two decades of transition in Albania, during which time archaeology has depended upon foreign missions, has left its mark. There are well-referenced reviews of new epigraphic discoveries, mosaics, metal vessels, numismatics and skeletal remains that cautiously open a window on larger historical issues, but for the most part these issues are resisted. Of these reviews, Metalla's essay takes Albanian archaeology in a new direction with her short overview of ninth- to fifteenth-century ceramics from Durrës. Medieval archaeology was unknown to communist Albania, yet Durrës, at the terminus of the Via Egnatia—the road to Constantinople—provides peerless information on Adriatic Sea wares that in turn cast light on the commercial history of a tract of the Mediterranean long assumed to be a Venetian province. In fact, as Metalla shows, a wide range of South Italian and southern Greek (as opposed to Venetian) wares dominate the assemblages from recent salvage excavations and the Albanian-Italian campaigns in the Trajanic amphitheatre. Metalla does not describe any Ottoman ceramics, unlike Dyczek and Shpuza, directors of a joint Albanian-Polish project, who trace Shkodra's antiquity from the Hellenistic period to the eighteenth century. The short sections given to Shkodra's medieval to Ottoman defences, as well as Ottoman material culture, are modestly groundbreaking.

Not all the contributions have been shaped by collaborations with foreign missions. Two contributions by resilient archaeologists from the past stand out, each re-packaging their theses for a new assembly of Albanian archaeologists. First, drawing entirely upon his many excavations made between 1970 and 1990, Lako, together with Muçaj, Bushi and Xhyheri, offers a new description of ancient Onchesmos (the modern resort town of Saranda). An entirely new topographic configuration of the ancient town is proposed in tab. 1.1 of their essay, contending that the late antique town was three times the size of the previously published walled area. It is a bold argument made on the basis that Onchesmos should

have been more extensive than was always believed. Lacking supporting evidence for a new circuit of walls, this conjecture remains entirely hypothetical and a curiosity. The authors, nonetheless, should be complemented for attempting a new synthesis, deploying their command of later Roman ceramic types defined in other Mediterranean contexts and unknown to communist archaeology. Second, and far bolder in its objective, is Ceka's 'The time and the place of the formation of the Albanians in the Middle Ages'. This long, well-referenced essay reviews a wide range of mortuary evidence, settlement finds and epigraphic data from the late antique and mid Byzantine eras. It is a re-statement of an old thesis, explaining how the late antique and post-Roman 'Koman' culture (somehow) gave rise to the Albanians, first mentioned in the eleventh century. Ceka concludes his overview as follows:

*we would emphasise that the shaping of the Albanian people on the basis of the Illyrian ethnos is a process documented in a convincing way through the evidence derived from archaeological investigations.* (p. 541)

Ceka, the son of Hasan Ceka, 'the father of Albanian archaeology' (Hodges 2014), proudly sustains a thesis that was the backbone of the Institute of Archaeology from the 1960s onwards. Elegantly argued, Ceka nonetheless ignores the archaeological evidence for an 'Ice Age settling on the Roman Empire' (at places such as Butrint, Bowden & Hodges 2012) to privilege a positivist treatment of the written sources. His contribution highlights the regrettable absence of a report in these proceedings on the current excavations at the village and cemeteries of Koman by Nallbani (2008) and the wider debate about the ethnicity of these peoples (Bowden 2014).

Two decades on from the collapse of communism, it is evident from these proceedings that Albanian archaeology, after a difficult few years, has mostly found refuge in collaboration with foreign missions, chiefly engaged in topographic studies of antiquity. The rich array of projects in a country where only Soviet missions were welcomed between 1944 and 1988 is a significant and promising platform on which to build a future, and clearly a brave move, championed by Luan Përzhita and his colleagues, that must be welcomed. On the other hand,

given Albania's especially rich prehistory—positioned territorially between the Mediterranean, Greece and the central Balkans—it is to be hoped that more partnerships leading to scientific analyses such as those introduced by Allen and Touchais in their collaborations will occur over the coming 25 years. Finally, given the status of Albania's archaeologists and some of the excellent research undertaken in the communist era, it is important that a new generation confronts the principal archaeologists from before 1990 to forge a dialogue that is more than mechanical, as Miraj and Zeqo feared in 1993. Social change has been achieved quickly in Albania as its people have sought to be European after four decades of isolation. Political change has occurred much more slowly, and tied to this is a resistance to debating the roots of the country other than in terms of its cultural heritage resources. When this debate occurs Albania's archaeologists will have been released from the dark shadow of Enver Hoxha.

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