



Butrint in Albania

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Abstract

This work is the result of a study trip to Albania that the author took in the company of architect Ramadan Aliu in September 2012. At that time, architect Aliu was a doctoral student at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, and he worked on his doctoral dissertation (Comparative analysis of selected examples of cities in Macedonia and Albania) under the mentorship of the author. Butrint was one of the places/cities they visited. Besides Butrint, these were Berat, Durrës, Gjirokastrë, Krujë, Shkodër, Tirana, Vlorë and many natural sights such as the famous source of 'The Blue Eye' ('Syri i Kaltër', for example). The aim of the study trip was to get to know cities on the spot and to contribute to the author's theory of „Architecturally Defined Space“ through their analysis (through 'cabinet work'). Archaeological evidence shows that Butrint was founded by Corfu traders in the eighth century BC. Located along the Adriatic coast, the city functioned as a way station between Epirus and the Italian territories to the south. Butrint was colonized by the Romans under Julius Caesar in 44 BC, and was later occupied by the Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman Empires. These layers of civilization were rediscovered by the Italian archaeologist Luigi Ugolini in the 1920s, who unearthed an ancient amphitheater dating back to the 2nd year BC. Subsequent excavations revealed Roman villas with intact mosaic floors, sanctuaries, a baptistery and a Byzantine palace.

Keywords: Albania, butrint, synergy of natural environment, social environment and man

1. Introduction

This work is the result of a study trip to Albania that the author took in the company of architect Ramadan Aliu in September 2012. At that time, architect Aliu was a doctoral student at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, and he worked on his doctoral dissertation (Comparative analysis of selected examples of cities in Macedonia and Albania) under the mentorship of the author. Butrint was one of the places/cities they visited. Besides Butrint, these were Berat, Durrës, Gjirokastrë, Krujë, Shkodër, Tirana, Vlorë and many natural sights such as the famous source of 'The Blue Eye' ('Syri i Kaltër', for example). The goal of the study trip was to get to know cities on the spot and to analyze them (through 'cabinet work') to contribute to the author's theory of „Architecturally Defined Space“^[1, 2, 3]. Butrint is located in the south of Albania, about 15 km from the modern city of Saranda (Geographic coordinates: 39°44'44.96"N, 20°01'14.69"E, Elevation: 17 m). With its hinterland, it forms an exceptional cultural landscape, which has developed organically over many centuries. Archaeological findings testify to the presence of people in this area between the 12th and 8th centuries BC. The city was founded by the ancient Greek tribe of the Chaonians when it was called Βουθροτόν (Bouthrōtón). By the 4th century BC, many architectural and cultural facilities were built here: a theater, a sanctuary dedicated to the ancient Greek god Asclepius (Ἀσκληπιός) and an agora. Around 380 BC, the settlement was fortified by a strong stone wall with five gates, which framed an area of 4 ha. Ancient Romans take possession (228 BC) of this city, which becomes part of the protectorate of Corfu. Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) granted this city (44 BC) the status of colonia as a reward for his soldiers who fought against his rival for power, Gnaeus Pompeus Magnus (106-48 BC).

The Roman emperor Gaius Octavianus Thurinus-Augustus (63 BC) restored the status of colonia when the city was expanded and organized with urban infrastructure. Then the following were built: aqueduct, thermal baths, forum complex, nymphaneum (temple dedicated to nymphs) and a large number of residential buildings. In the 3rd century, the city suffered an earthquake when many buildings built up to that time were demolished. Despite the earthquake, the city was rebuilt in the late antique period when the Triconch Palace was built (425) [4, 5, 6]. After the Romans, this city was ruled by the First Bulgarian Empire (7th century) and Byzantium (9th century). After a restless long period (marked by the Crusades), Butrint changed its owners when (1386) it was bought by the Venetian Republic due to their interest in the island of Corfu. There were frequent conflicts between

the Venetians and the Ottoman Empire for supremacy over Butrint (mostly due to the strategically important island of Corfu) until 1799, when it was conquered by Ali Pasha Tepelena (1740-1822). Butrint remained part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912.

The first major archaeological survey of Butrinto was started (1928) by Italian archaeologists under the direction of Luigi Mario Ugolini (1895-1936). Research was intensified (1970-1993) under the direction of the Albanian Institute of Archaeology. The city is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in Albania. Due to its enormous wealth of cultural, historical and natural value, Butrint was included (1992) in the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage [6]. Since 2000, it has had the status of a national park [8, 9] (Figure 1).



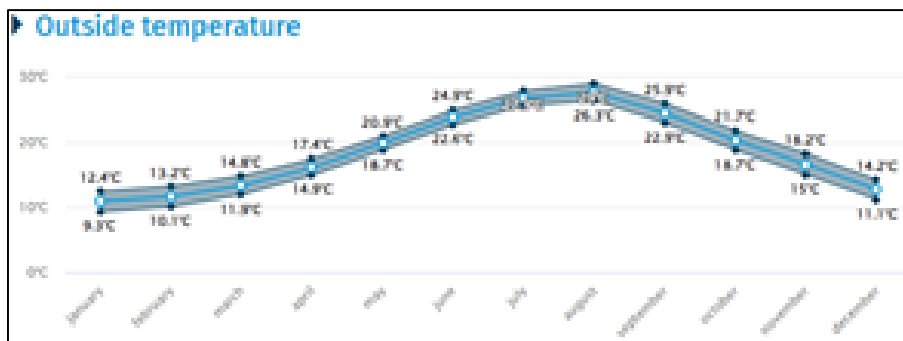
Source: Google Earth. Accessed: October 27, 2023.

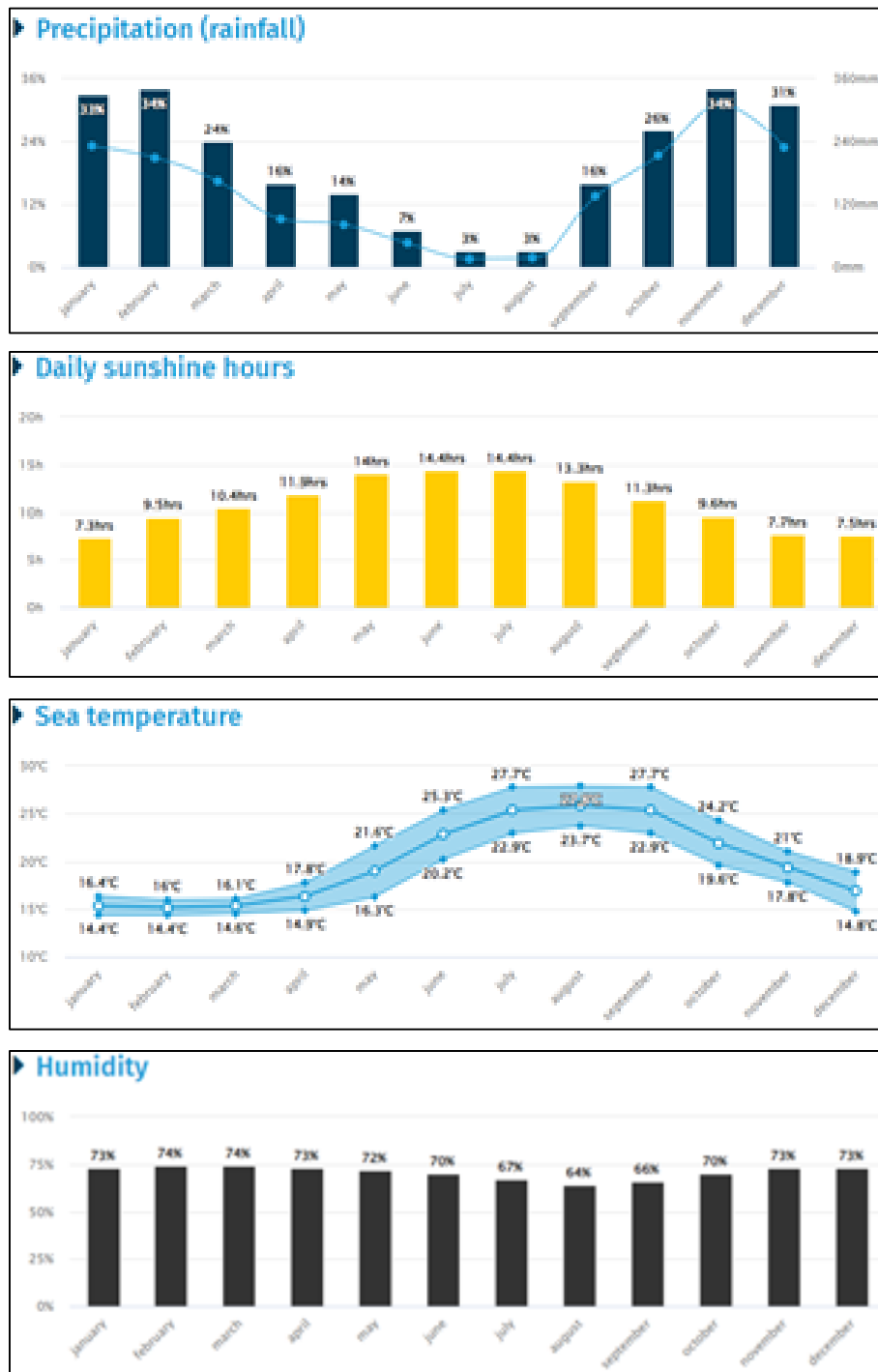
Fig 1: Butrint in Albania. Location

2. Natural resources and sights

Butrint has a hot summer Mediterranean climate (type Csa and Csb according to the Köppen-Geiger climate classification). The highest annual average temperature in Butrint is 21 °C (ranging from 13 °C in January to 30 °C in August). The annual amount of precipitation is 1732 mm/m², with a minimum amount of precipitation of 16 mm/m² in July

and a maximum amount of precipitation of 310 mm/m² in November. The graphs below show the following seasonal norms for the city of Butrint: minimum and maximum outdoor temperature, monthly precipitation, daily average sunshine, sea temperature and relative humidity for each month of the year [10] (Figure 2).





Source: Weather and climate in Butrint

<https://www.whereandwhen.net/when/europe/albania/butrint/>, Accessed: October 27, 2023.

Fig 2: Climate in Butrint, Albania

Butrint is located on a small peninsula and is connected by land to the city of Soranda. The peninsula is partly surrounded by a narrow channel (Vivari) that connects Lake Butrint with the Ionian Sea. This channel separates Butrint from the vast arable fields in the lowlands and pastures in the higher areas. The rich hinterland was the basis for the creation and development of Butrint, and its favorable geographical position (in all historical and political circumstances) generated its development. The Ionian Sea and Lake Butrint (area 16 km²) have always been rich in fish, so fishing was a good and stable basis of life. The southern part of the lake is today included in the Butrint National Park, which is significant for the preservation of its extremely rich biodiversity of plant and animal life, including a large

number of bird species. This is especially important today when the city-archaeological site has become a first-class tourist attraction from where Albania receives significant funds. The natural and cultural values of Butrint are numerous. Butrint was an important stop along a major trade route in the eighth century and was controlled by various empires, including the Romans, Byzantines, Venetians and Ottomans. The archaeological remains of Butrint reflect the diversity of different cultures that built, lived and worked in the settlement.

3. Architectural cultural and historical heritage

In general, Albanian architecture is a cumulus of cultures and lifestyles derived from numerous civilizations that once

established themselves there: Illyrians, ancient Greece, ancient Romans, Venetians, Ottomans. Monumental Roman architecture emerged from the period of the rule of the Roman Empire in this area, architecture that now represents an important attraction when visiting the country [11,12]. This is especially visible in Butrint and Dures. Perhaps the most outstanding legacy was given by the Byzantine Empire. Cities and surrounding places such as Shkodër, Krujë, Korçë, Berat, Voskopojë, Gjirokaster, for example, are the architectural treasures of Albania [2]. The archeological site of Butrint abounds with extremely valuable more or less preserved remains of a large number of individual architectural buildings and ensembles, among which are: Acropolis, Theater, Altar of Dionysus, Nymphaeum, Roman Baths, Gymnasium, Forum, Aqueduct,

Temples of Minerva and Asclepius, Lion's Gate, Baptistery, Ali Pasha Tepelena Palace, Water Cistern, Great Basilica (16th century), (Figures 3-15). Near Butrint is the town of Sarandë with a fortress on a hill (Figures 1,16). The forts bear witness to the different phases of their construction from the time of the Greek colony to the Middle Ages. The most interesting ancient Greek monument is the theater, which is quite well preserved. The largest ruin from the Paleo-Christian era is the baptistery, an ancient Roman monument adapted to the cultural needs of Christianity. The floor is a beautiful mosaic. The Paleo-Christian basilica was rebuilt in the 9th century, and the ruins are well enough preserved to allow analysis of the structure (three naves with a transept and an outer polygonal apse).



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 3: Map of the city-archaeological site (panel inside the Butrinta complex)





Source: Author (September 27, 2012)
Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 4: Architectural sequences of Butrint

The Roman forum at Butrint was discovered in 2005, and is the only known forum in Epeiros and one of the best preserved from the Augustan period (27 BC - 14 BC) in the provinces of the Roman Empire (Figure 5). Built more than 2,000 years ago by Roman colonists, the forum was the center of public justice, administration, business, religion and

entertainment. The excavation project of the Roman forum sheds light on the forum and reveals a story that spans millennia, from the time of the city's creation in the 7th century BC to its abandonment in the 16th century^[13] (Figures 6, 12).



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 5: The Roman Forum (with access road)



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 6: Expansion of Butrint (panel within the Butrint complex)

The Venetian tower (which dates from the 16th century) is well preserved (Figure 7). Later, only the roof, doors, drawbridge and wooden ladder between floors were reconstructed, while the rest remained original. The entrance and the lowest floor are more than 3 meters above ground level and are located on the east side, accessible by a stone staircase and a wooden drawbridge. The second floor has a vaulted roof. The south facade has one window on each floor, as well as two fire loops located on either side of the lower

floor windows. It has musket bays all round and cannon bays divided into two tiers on the south side in the direction of the Vivari Canal. At the time the tower was built, the fortified walls of Butrint survived only slightly above the ground level in this area, in fact the tower itself was built above the earlier defense system^[9,14]. Near the Venetian tower there is a small bathhouse with a central octagonal room, surrounded by other smaller rooms. The excavation of its remains has not been completed, so today it is impossible to determine whether it

was a public bath or a private one. On the eastern side, there is an entrance porch, paved with black and white mosaic, and a medieval wall built from the remains of the porch wall, whose relationship with the bathhouse remains unclear. The

walls are preserved about 1 m above the ground. The unusual shape of this bathing place dates the structure to the 5th century.



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 7: Venetian Tower in Butrint (1516)

The theater in Butrint was originally built during the time of ancient Greece, 2 BC, and was later rebuilt with more Roman

influence. The theater was part of a sanctuary used for religious ceremonies and community forums (Figure 8).



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 8: Ancient amphitheater

The Temple of Asclepius, the amphitheater and other Roman ruins are some of the best in Europe and the highlight of the national park (Figure 9). This is an unusual integration of archeology and nature. The temple is located on a series of

natural terraces where it is located in front of the amphitheater. The area is well maintained and easily managed to explore this archaeological treasure from around 3 BC.



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 9: The remains of the Temple of Asklepios in Butrint

A holy well or holy spring is a spring or small pool of water worshiped in a pagan or Christian context, sometimes both. The water of the holy wells is believed to have healing properties, thanks to the numinous presence of its guardian spirit or Christian saint. Local legends are often associated

with them. Holy wells are often places of rituals and pilgrimages, where prayers are offered and votive gifts are left. In ancient Greece and Rome, a *nymphaeum* or *nymphaion* (Greek: νυμφαίον), was a monument dedicated to nymphs, especially those of springs (Figure 10).

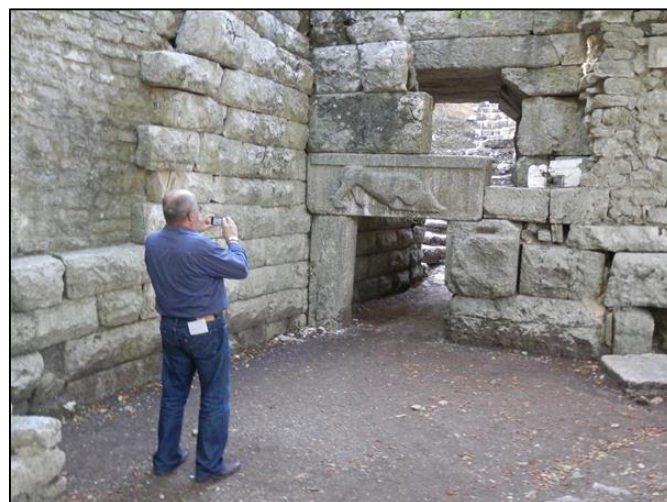


Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 10: The author next to the Holy Well in Butrint

The Lion Gate in Butrint was discovered by Luigi Ugolini between 1928 and 1935^[15]. It was one of the approaches to the acropolis from the northern gulf during the Classical and Hellenistic eras. It is named after a lintel depicting a lion devouring a bull, which is considered to be of archaic inspiration. The gate we see today is the result of a medieval reconstruction, when the original gate was reduced by placing a monolith on the south side and another block of large dimensions used as a lintel, thus creating a partial overlap between the two wall lines and a subsequent passage. Above the architrave is another series of blocks that fill the space left by the original entrance. It is clear that the architrave with the lion is a later addition because the southern wall of the entrance was reduced to accommodate it (Figure 11). The opening is not wide, and the main beams hold large shelves. The roof of the gate is built using profiled brackets that

protrude from the side walls and supporting stones that are partially supported by the side walls. Above the ceiling is a row of profiled stone that supported the second ceiling. Hammond believed that the narrowed entrance that forms the second stage of the doorway was created after the double ceiling was exposed, meaning that the new facade was designed to conceal the gap between the two ceilings with a new false architrave (the one with the lion). This gate was not used for the passage of vehicles, so reducing the entrance was not a problem. Both Ugolini and Zheku date the reconstruction of the gate to late antiquity, around the 6th century, while Karaiskaj believed it to have taken place during the 1st century AD, during the reign of Augustus. He also stated that it was built after Jezerski vrata, both because of its position in front of the passage, and because of a different style of construction^[16,17].



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 11: The author in front of the Lion's Gate



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 12: Roman Town Planning in Butrint

The Baptistery is one of the most important monuments of Butrint and one of the most complex baptisteries of that time in the Balkans. Its construction can be dated around 550 –

575 based on the stylistic analysis of the large mosaic pavement. The complex was built on the remains of a Roman bath (Figure 13).

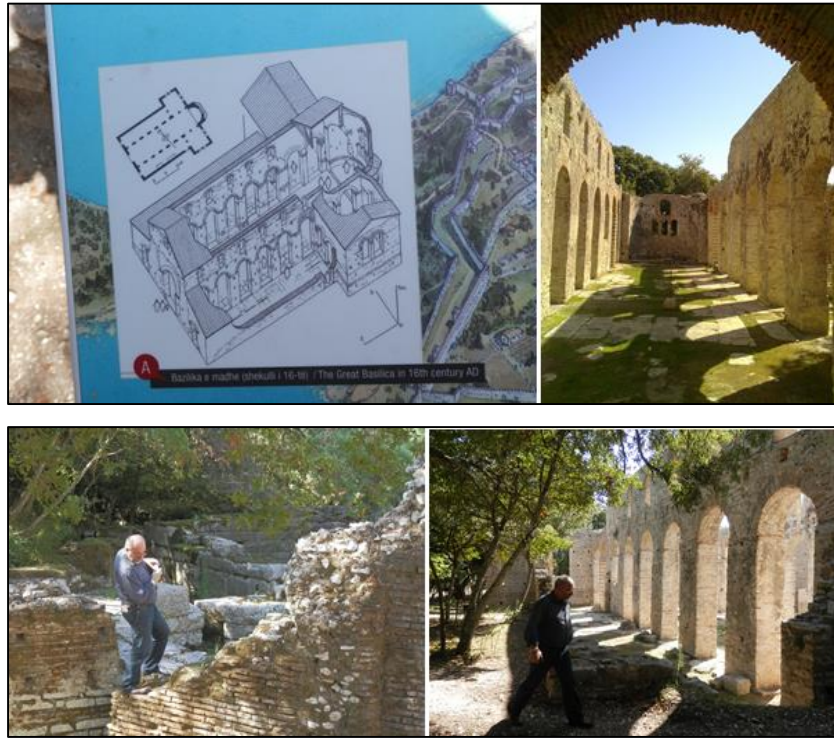


Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 13: Remains of the Baptistery in Butrint

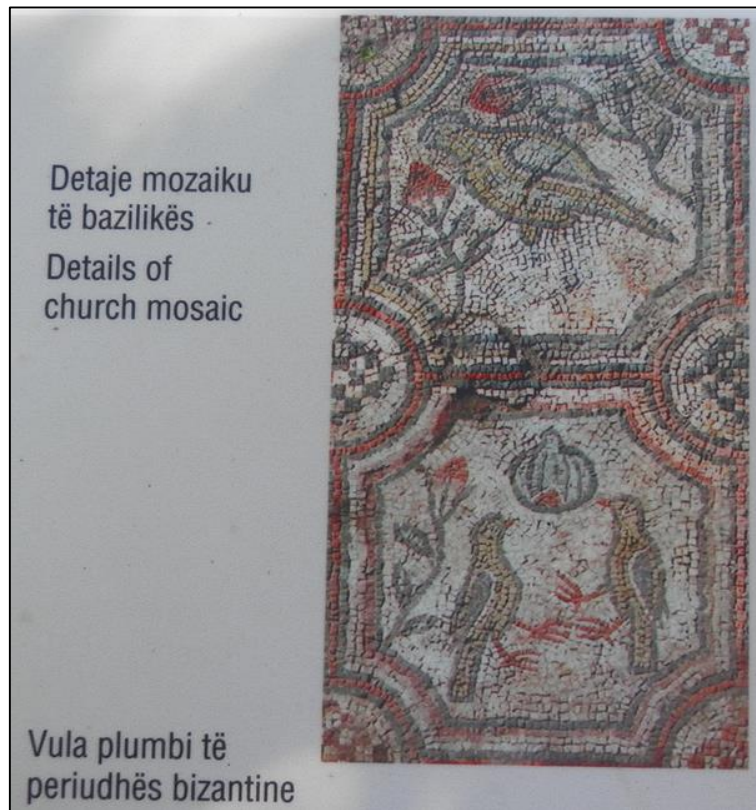
The Great basilica has been preserved almost to the height of the roof, which makes it one of the best-preserved late antique basilicas in the region. It was built in the first half of the 6th century. After a period of ruin, the church was remodeled

between the 9th and 13th centuries AD, in the period of the Epirus despotism. It seems that the monument was abandoned in the 18th century (Figures 14,15).



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 14: Remains of the Great Basilica in Butrint



Source: Author (September 27, 2012)

Fig 15: Remains of mosaics in the Great Basilica



Source: Ramadan Aliu (September 27, 2012)

Fig 16: Author at dinner in Sarandë fortress (near Butrint)

4. Conclusion

The small national park on the peninsula consists of swamps, reed beds, coastal waters, rocky shores, sandy beaches and Mediterranean forests. Apart from these aspects of nature, the national park has ancient Roman ruins and a small amphitheater as part of the ruins. It is the ecological environment of the lagoon in which the archaeological gem is located that makes this national park such a treasure. These ruins are 2,500 years old, and some of them are the best preserved Roman ruins in all of Europe. The temple of Asklepios is one of the highlights of the ruins. Some of the other ruins represent part of the early Christian presence in Albania. The fauna of the park includes 39 species of mammals, 246 species of birds, as well as an abundance of coastal species. Some of the mammals are the gray wolf, the red fox, the golden jackal, the otter and the marten. In the coastal waters, there are bottlenose dolphins, short-beaked dolphins, striped dolphins, fur seals, loggerhead turtles and leatherback turtles. Bird watchers have the chance to see peregrine falcon, buzzard, stone partridge and the incredible bald eagle. There are numerous other species of birds that will delight bird lovers. The development of Butrint's natural environment led to the abandonment of the city at the end of the Middle Ages, with the result that this archaeological site provides valuable evidence of ancient and medieval civilizations on the territory of modern Albania. The property is of sufficient size (200 ha) to include a significant proportion of attributes that express its outstanding universal value. Buried archaeological sites, existing ruins and historical buildings are relatively well preserved. Although a World Heritage property, Butrint does not suffer significantly from the negative effects of development or neglect; there are vulnerabilities, such as the rise of seasonal water levels, the need for better coordination of conservation works and archaeological excavations, the growth of vegetation and the structural instability of some monuments. There are also some pressures from modern development, including roads and urban expansion around the property. Despite this, Butrint is still an excellent example of the preservation of ancient and medieval urban occupation. The surrounding landscape provides a context for past urban changes in Butrint. The authenticity of Butrint World Heritage is linked

to its excellent preservation in a place where changing human interaction with the environment can be observed in preserved monuments, underground archeology and the surrounding landscape. The quality of the restoration and conservation works since 1924 was high. Later interventions adhered to modern standards as stated in the Venice Charter from 1964^[7].

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