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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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 Translated by

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Butrint before the Butrint foundation

Richard Hodges

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Keywords

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At the time of Richard Hodges' first visit to Albania in 1993, less than three years after a peaceful transition from the hardline communist regime of Enver Hoxa to a democratic government, the country was experiencing great hardships. Back then, the archaeological site of Butrint was far from being internationally recognised as a tourist destination and suffered heavily from looting. After almost 20 years of groundbreaking discoveries and cutting-hedge management activities in collaboration with international organizations, in 2012, Richard Hodges left behind a state-of-the-art national park - Butrint National Park - which is today one of the most interesting tourist destinations of Albania, but most importantly, a significant source of wealth for the entire region.

This memoir describes Richard Hodges' first visit to Butrint, chaperoned by archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology of Albania, coming to terms with the effects of the transition from communism to a democratic republic.

Albania was in a long after-shock in 1993. A people overwhelmed by the manifest absurdity of their communist genesis. Only the children, as so often in these countries, were able to approach us, headstrong with the freedom that the new anarchy brought to daily living. Yet behind this netherworld lay medieval landscapes bathed in an autumnal light. Peering out from our hired Mercedes, past the serene driver and our eerily bloodless guide, it was easy to be seduced by the emptiness of the seascapes and mountain-scapes. These brought to mind the unviolated terrains of my youth, but here they had been locked in aspic by a Stalinist who had inverted the world.

This particular bright morning we left Saranda heading south. Gjergj, our guide and minder, began his numbing monologue almost at once. Speaking in Italian, he assured us that this was a day we would always remember. Everything else had been an *antipasto*. This was his jest. He was referring as much to his newfound confidence in Italian as to the prospect of visiting Butrint. I smiled to my companion, conscious of the battered old Volkswagen trailing along behind us containing Gjergj's colleagues, Astrid and Kosta.

The night before Gjergj had treated Astrid and Kosta like country cousins as we strolled along Saranda's sea-front to visit the wretched ill-lit office where they worked. They were both from Saranda, members of the Greek minority with its long origins stretching back to Byzantium and before. Each, with a pace or two's space from their boss, warned us in fluent English to be cautious about Gjergj. They could arrange for us to dig in Butrint and it would be much easier. They had good

relations with the Greek archaeological mission at Butrint. I chose to ignore the offers, trusting that with time the panorama of matters here would become obvious and with that, with design, we should proceed.

Kosta's work on Saranda's later Roman archaeology impressed us. Sitting in his office, conscious of the damp, and the darkening light, I realized we were being royally treated as he took his thesis out and laid it graciously on the empty, unsteady table. Flicking through it - the heavy paper faintly blurred by a worn typing ribbon on coarse paper - I marvelled at the cogent analysis. For better or worse I compared it with the invariably lamentable output by Italian archaeologists and breezily complemented the author. He had screwed his face up a little, aging before my eyes. In his husky English he thanked me. He did not ask for anything more, then or ever again. In time I came to realize that the end of communism terminated the safe if unreal stability of his scholar's life and compelled him to reckon everything in terms of dollars or drachmas to sustain his family. With altered priorities Kosta knew that his thesis, an exercise made against all the odds, was the apogee of his life and destiny now had to be defined in terms of survival. His quiet defeat was my first lesson in the post-communist reality of Albania.

We followed the narrow surfaced road along the corniche, always conscious of the shimmering sea sweeping away to the vertiginous bulk of Corfu on our right. Only ferries, reduced to toys by the scale of the horizon, were floating on the bright aquamarine waters. Soon we veered around the grounds of an austere concrete hotel where - Gjergj disdainfully informed us - Party members once took their seaside vacations. We would come to know its charms better within the arc of a year. Perched above the rocks, this shapeless block was as graceless as its view was extraordinary. On across the Cuka channel, cut when the Chinese were in Albania to drain the marshes north of Lake Butrint, and on now, concealed from the sea, for a mile or so, with a thin splinter of the polished water coming into sight. As we approached the heights above

its northernmost corner, the full import of this inland sea became apparent. Bathed in dreamy autumnal shafts of light, an incipient haze being mixed with the lingering wisps of mists, the placid grey waters ebbed away into the burnt rolling hills beyond. I asked Gjergj to call the driver to a halt and I scrambled out to savour this Homeric landscape.

It was a floating landscape. The oriental illusion conjured up an unforgettable trip I made in my youth to Knidos in southwest Turkey where, I often feel, my life began. Never before had I experienced such shimmering scenes, beckoning to my curiosity as an archaeologist. Now, nearly a quarter-century later, on this bright September morning, I was being seduced in adulthood by the very same alchemy of mesmerizing and, in many respects, intangible, worlds. I had quit Turkey with deep dissatisfaction for the arrogant disregard for its beauty by the project on which I had served. Now delving deep for my missionary instincts, here was my chance to construct a project which would safeguard this scene for generations and, in so doing, bringing lasting support to this vanquished country.

Gjergj, I feel sure, could gauge something of the seduction. He emitted a puff of satisfaction that I would soon learn to read. If I had but known it then, I could have calculated his calculations. Riches would be his with the arrival of the British. London lay before him. For Gjergj, as we slowly learned, was confused by capitalism and like so many, captivated by an irredeemable myth. As we were rich, American-style (as the Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha had denounced), so he soon would be.

This passing moment was eclipsed by the long span of the lake and the hills beyond as we gingerly followed the road carved into the contours of the hill and then, like magic, passed safely into olive groves on sharp terraces tumbling down to the mouth of the Straits of Corfu. In a split second the spectrum of our gaze switched from the Balkan interior to the sunlit Ionian Sea. This was Ksamili. As a seamark this was then a gaggle of tawdry tower blocks and a half-cocked hotel - the Sea Eagle - on top of a bluff before a majestic

sparkling bay with green islands. Ten years before Eric Newby had paused here after a monotonous tour of communist Albania. The sight of the Party apparatchiks tanning themselves in their imported finery on the beach - off-limits for ordinary folk - attracted his drollest disdain. I looked for tourists as we silently slipped through the olive and citrus groves, but apart from pigs contentedly pannaging, it was empty. Hewn olive trees, cut for firewood, soon outnumbered the standing ones. It was the peasants, Gjergj said - the ones whose wretchedness alarmed Newby no doubt - who had wickedly felled the trees. Trees, he continued, as we accelerated out of the village, planted by Party zealots and political prisoners on the rising tiers of terraces. From here, I could imagine, these trapped people had laboured, inhaling the gentle breezes from the Straits and taking ounces of energy from a panorama reaching across the channel to Corfu.

We then turned sharply, the driver braking at the crest of the hill as the road began its descent alongside the Vivari Channel far below us. Before us, lay the polished Channel, partly obscured by the drifting pall of mist. A castle guarded one side. From here, I recalled, Ottomans had issued forth in the dead of night to surprise the Venetian defenders on this side. The Venetian guard had been bribed ahead of time, but his comrades resisted the attack and strung up their treacherous colleague. Beyond the fortress lay a plain criss-crossed with dykes, and then the rolling hills fusing into a shapely triangular hill - ancient Kestrine, supposedly founded by Kestrinos, the blessed progeny of the Trojan exiles, Andromache and Helenus - before the curtain of mountains. The scene was muted. Nothing moved. It possessed the serenity of a lost valley, every part burnt a shade of gold as the sun pressed upwards over the high distant ranges. Then, a surprise. At a sharp shoulder above the Channel, immediately below a medieval watchtower, the wooded hill of ancient *Buthrotum* came into view. The dark throng of trees could not have been more unexpected in this landscape shorn of woods and greenery. Here, then, was the oasis, snuck between the sea and mountains that provided

succour to the Trojan exile, Aeneas, on his voyage to Rome.

Gjergj turned and fixed us with a mischievous grin. Pleased as Punch with the morning weather and uncharacteristically unguarded in anticipation of our approval of the place. Ignoring him, as we slowed to a halt in front of the paint-chipped iron gates to the ancient city, I cast my mind back to the pile of books I had leafed through about Albania's only well-known archaeological site.

Butrint owes much to Virgil and his courtier's desire to flatter the Emperor Augustus, master of an immense Roman kingdom. Luigi Maria Ugolini, the Italian excavator of the city in the 1920s and 1930s, lyrically explains that, as he read Virgil's *Aeneid* on the acropolis at Mycenae in 1925, he dreamed of giving new form to the legend at Butrint in the service (we read between the lines) of the then newly formed Italian Fascist government. That dream, rightly or wrongly, has made Butrint as eternal as Rome. Ugolini's huge excavations at Butrint belonged to a heroic age, launched by Heinrich Schliemann's legendary quest at Mycenae and Troy.

Butrint, ancient *Buthrotum*, sits at the crossroads of the Mediterranean. It is tucked off to the east side of the Straits of Corfu, directly opposite Corfu's mountainous north coast. "Corfu lies like a sickle beside the flanks of the mainland," Lawrence Durrell reminds us in *The Greek Islands* (1978), "forming a great calm bay, which narrows at both ends so that the tides are squeezed and calmed as they pass it." From this extraordinary setting, Butrint commanded the sea-routes up the Adriatic Sea to Venice, across to Sicily and Spain, and south through the Ionian Islands to the Aegean. Like Roman *Dyrrhachium* (*Epidamnus* in the 7th century BC; modern Durrës) to the north, it also controlled a passage into the mountainous Balkan interior. Here began a route to Thessalonika and, beyond, Constantinople.

For nearly three millennia Butrint has occupied a low hill on a sharp bend in the Vivari Channel, which connects the Corfu Straits to the inland lagoon of Lake Butrint. The walled city, designated the year before as a UNESCO

World Heritage Site, covers an area of circa 16 hectares; but our surveys on the eastern side of the Vivari Channel would show that at times in antiquity Butrint covered as much as 30 hectares.

The walled city comprises two parts: the acropolis and the lower city. The acropolis is a long narrow bluff, approximately 200 metres long and 60 metres at its widest, rising up to 42 metres above sea level at its east end. Its sides are accentuated by a circuit of walls that separate it from the natural and artificial terraces gathered around the flanks of the hill. The lower city occupies the lower-lying contours down to the edge of the Vivari Channel. Remains of a cemetery are recorded on the rocky spine of the hill running west from the acropolis, but its extent is unknown. The most obvious monument outside the city walls, on the opposite side of the channel, is the Triangular Castle, which after 1572 (when the Venetians formally designated the town as deserted) became the nucleus of the early modern settlement.

Its setting is seductive. The place seems to belong to the world of Achilles, Odysseus and, of course, the wandering survivor, Aeneas. Still, unspoilt, sometimes one might imagine Virgil's poetic hero, Aeneas, arriving today. Butrint is a natural harbour, with sufficient depth in the Vivari Channel for most pre-modern vessels. More importantly, it is a safe anchorage. Vessels ploughing the frequently difficult currents north of Corfu, and then entering the 3 kilometre-wide Straits, could find shelter at Butrint from both northerly and southerly winds. Today hundreds of ferries in high summer pass unsuspectingly close to Butrint. Seemingly unconnected from the muffled beat of their engines, these leviathans slip silently back and forth above the marshes in front of the vertiginous back-drop of Mount Pantokrator, the epicentre of northern Corfu.

The Mediterranean Pilot (1880) says that Butrint Bay affords the best anchorage on the coast abreast Corfu, and that the Vivari Channel can only be entered by small boats because a sand bar lies across its mouth. A second, though less protected, anchorage lays in Ksamili Bay,

immediately east of the northern mouth of the Straits of Corfu. It is no surprise that remains of Roman and more modern cargoes have been found here by amateur divers.

Gjergj told us none of this. He stood motionless, silent, as my companion and I stared at the chain-ferry arriving after traversing the 80 metres across the Vivari Channel. The chain was a wire rope, fraying in numerous places, catching, twisting and flicking away urgently from the uneven twirling flywheels. Driven by a Mercedes motor in the shabby hut close to the Triangular Castle opposite, it raced towards our shore and with exactitude halted as though computerised. A driver advanced to each of two rusty steel plates, simple ramps that when tipped, drop to shore allowing the vehicle to descend the foot or so onto the quay. The clang as the plates hit the simple ramp was contained by the bluff of Butrint and circulated like cannon shots over the lagoon.

Gazing out from here, I felt a disquieting emptiness. The day was brightening to be blissful after a week of storms. Yet this place was ominously trapped between worlds. Corfu was clearly visible to the west, flush with affluence. To the east, beyond the triangular point of Kestrine, the heart of Epirus lay in a virtual darkness. The liminality of the place soon engaged us. Gjergj in his antiseptic Parisian attire was as out-of-place as we were. To the men who ambled off the chain-ferry in flip-flops and faded hand-me-down vestments, we were readily identifiable foreigners whereas Gjergj was a brand of the bathing beauties whose insensitivity to Albania's crushing poverty had a decade earlier earned Eric Newby's odium.

Later I appreciated that I was not the first to sense this disquiet at Butrint. William Martin Leake arrived by boat on a crisp January day in 1805 determined to assess the site against Virgil's description. Of course he had no difficulty in identifying the ruins with those of ancient *Buthrotum*. Yet the topography troubled him: the acropolis seemed insufficiently elevated to be Virgil's 'lofty city' and tartly observed: "Virgil had a most imperfect idea of the place, when he applied to it the epithet

of lofty, and its resemblance to Troy is very like that of Monmouth to Macedon.” His nemesis, Francois Poucqueville, the French plenipotentiary, coincidentally made a visit later the same month. He describes the spot with contempt: “The air of these lakes, and consequently of Butrinto, is now as pestilential as that of the famous Pontine marshes of Italy. The effects of this air are dreaded even across the sea in Corfu...” The effervescent Edward Lear, though, admired its emptiness and, in his sketches made in January 1857, captures the smallness of the ruins in their sweeping Epirote fastness. A decade later the Reverend Henry Fanshawe Tozer arrived from the interior by the Venetian castle. He recalls it as follows:

Toward evening we arrived at a village called Livari, a corruption, it is thought of Vivarium, from the fisheries in the lake, which here finds an outlet into the sea by means of a river. By the people of the place the lake is also called Boïdoperes. At Corfu the village is known as Butrinto or Vutzindro, but in the country itself we found these names unknown, a source of confusion, which caused us much difficulty. On the opposite side of the water is a rocky height, with remains of walls, which mark the site of the ancient *Buthrotum*, the *celsam Buthroti urbem* of Virgil. As we were embarking to cross to Corfu, I said to a Turkish official who was standing by, “Now we are leaving Turkey?” “Yes,” he replied, “now you are going to Europe.”

The old off-blue Volkswagen drew up behind the Mercedes and out, a little sleepy-eyed, came Astrid and Kosta. Kosta beamed at me as if to say we, as real archaeologists, were in the right place now. Gjergj motioned stiffly and we passed through the narrow gate into the site. No one stopped us; no one, indeed, was around. Across the Channel an old man yelled, the guttural shout running like a ripple over the water to be caught by Kosta. Dapper man that he was, he stopped and hurled back a reply, then muttered and hawked, the spittle propelled in a parabola into the burnt grass. Before us was the Venetian tower, its quaintly cocked hat roof sorely in need of new tiles. But the path led us away up the gentle slope through an avenue of langerously tall eucalyptuses.

Gjergj paused under the canopy of trees, the trampled streamers from a grassy nest

that had been blown out of the boughs at his feet. “Stalin gave these trees to Enver Hoxha,” he said in Italian. Astrid with studied disdain looked away. “And you see the two pillars here. These were for an Italian war memorial to their fascist dead in the mountains near Vlora. Winter 1940. Hoxha sent it here.”

My companion and I stared at the bleached white fluted columns. As I entered this avenue, I turned over in my mind the capricious nature of history and monuments: an Italian gift to shape an uneasy post-war peace translated into a triumphal way. We advanced in silence, conscious for the first time of the steady chatter of cicadas in the woodland. Within moments we were upon the site of Luigi Ugolini’s great excavations. From the crazy-paved path laid for Nikita Khrushchev’s visit everything was clear. Above us lay the acropolis. The Greeks were working there, Astrid explained jauntily. Then he pointed to the Temple of Asklepios, lodged above a cyclopean terrace wall on the mid-slope. The bust of the god was stolen two years before, he whispered. My companion and I looked at him.

“Many things were stolen so the Institute closed the museum and took the rest to Tirana,” he admitted. His sadness was infectious.

“Who stole them?”, I asked naively.

Kosta shrugged before Gjergj interjected in Italian: “You must remember how poor we all were in 1990. Everything was possible. Even archaeologists need to feed their families.” Three years ago or less. I guessed his studied gaze into my eyes was intended to say that our companions were probably culpable. And indeed, there was an unfounded rumour four years later that Astrid met a wretched end in Greece mixed up in smuggling antiquities.

Our eyes rested upon the Theatre nestling at the foot of the slope. To one side a prytaneum, the council chamber, to the other the baths. Ugolini started his excavations here in the spring of 1928 believing that the protruding piers of the theatre were a bathhouse. With a legion of workmen raised in the surrounding villages and a little railway line along which the trucks took the soil, the zealot uncovered

the steps and soon the line of toppled imperial statues that assured him of immortality, in Albania at least.

Steps led to a wickerwork bridge into the tight little arena. But the paving slabs were deep below viscous water where turtles peered us from the shapeless patches free of floating lichen. Kosta picked up a pebble and hurled it into the water, causing the turtles to dive. "You can see the pavement below," he ventured, averting his eyes. Gjergj drew us towards the shrine, pointing out the manumissions along the parodos, the main entrance. The French School is publishing these, he said with an unmistakable grandiloquence as though we were plenipotentiaries of perfidious Albion once more vying with Napoleonic interests.

High above us a rude asbestos canopy extruded from the rock face. It sheltered plasterwork partially painted with ochreous reds and greens. "Ugolini began at the level of the roof," Kosta said, grasping my interest. "The church is thirteenth century." Now I recognized one half of the building. "See its paintings," he said, looking at the feint colouration on the bleached plaster.

With this knowledge, the mammoth scope of Ugolini's vast dig became apparent. Half-a hillside had been removed to unearth the Theatre. My mind fixed then and later on what manner of man he was. Suffering from a World War I wound – to die before he ever published much of his work at Butrint, aged 41 in 1936 – his resolve must have been prodigious. Everything had to be brought by boat to this mosquito-ridden place. His zeal was missionary, as were his bold ventures in self-publicity as he trumpeted his discoveries to audiences throughout Europe with majestic photographs made into lanternslides. His contemporaries were not impressed, as I discovered. A year later I had lunch in Cambridge with N.G.L. Hammond and his wife, both well into their eighties – genial, studious Oxbridge types – and he recalled how he visited Ugolini when working on his doctoral thesis in 1930. Ugolini, he recalled, insisted that his workmen salute him each day. The poverty in comparison with Greece (where he was at the British School at

Athens) affected him. But he chuckled heartily with the recollection of being arrested as a spy for bathing naked in the Pavllas river not so far from Butrint. Two years later I had dinner with Hasan Ceka ('the father of Albanian archaeology') in a poky apartment in the centre of Tirana. By then in his nineties, but plainly bright-eyed at the prospect of reminiscing, he told me in faultless German that Ugolini was a fascist and he did not care for him. This said, as we advanced through the wood, then and since I have never ceased to admire Ugolini's industry and his devotion to recording all facets of Butrint. He truly believed he was walking in Schliemann's shoes to trace Aeneas for his fatherland.

I spied a golden oriole as we strolled along the path. The flash of primary yellow, I calculated, was a harbinger of fortune. Veering off into the woods along a trail towards the Channel, Kosta halted before the well-preserved ruins of a large building. He thought it was a church. I nodded in agreement to satisfy him. It was obviously the dining room of a channel-side palace. This kind of building was comprehended while Albania was still under the regime, hence it was beyond the knowledge of the eager Kosta or his mentors. Plainly he wanted to dig here and Gjergj, now acting as the commissar-cum-real estate salesman, pointedly talked up the merits of the site.

Next we paused at the Baptistery. In places the sand flecked with leaves covering the mosaic had been scuffed back to reveal a patch of polychrome pavement. Gjergj let his shoulders drop and spoke rapidly in Italian. At the time, in my innocence, I was puzzled. He was recalling how he had been trained as an architect (he had told us this already and even shown us his sole handiwork near Fier two days before). The Party had despatched him to be an archaeologist here, at this very place, the baptistery. He had worked with Aleksander Meksi, then an archaeologist, now the Prime Minister, whom at the start of the week had launched our trip. In 1982 the Institute of Archaeology had descended for a summer school at Butrint and young pretenders like Gjergj were given personal tuition. All learnt

the art of joining a klan, identifying patrons and the mincing avoidance of confrontation, as they imbibed Enver Hoxha's texts and each endeavoured, in his or her individual way, to shape an origin myth for the land of the eagles. Each, I have no doubt, was trained in dissembling and the practice of making much out of little. Here, too, I imagine, they learnt to distinguish between those blessed with a Tirana pedigree and those from the provinces.

Months were spent here, resulting later in Meksi's seminal essay about the Baptistery. Years later I realized that the summer school was the Institute's response to the brutal confusion in Albania after the near-demented dictator had his lifelong colleague and prime minister, Mehmet Shehu, commit suicide. Hoxha had been almost blind and crippled by diabetes. Obsessively confused about who should succeed him, he had first selected Shehu, then denounced him as a multiple foreign agent and traitor to the motherland. Worse still then followed as Shehu's family was persecuted for treason. One son died and Shehu's aging wife, once a devoted partisan, was imprisoned and, for fear she would kill herself, her head was 'protected' by an iron mask. Shehu, an alumnus of the International Brigade, had been the ramrod that navigated Albania to victory against the Germans and thereafter through confused alliances with the Yugoslavians, then the Soviets, then with Mao's cultural revolution. Gjergj never explained his version of these events to me. Instead I can picture him in the dancing beams of sunlight penetrating the woodland canopy above us, day-dreaming of unshackled times devoted to archaeology. His freedom had been curtailed by ruination as Hoxha slipped inexorably towards death and bequeathed a nation mired in illusion. Queuing for bread in the early hours was how Gjergj summed up this transition to the present. Now, illuminated by the warm pencils of light, he spoke of youthful digging days and drinking, as all archaeologists worldwide tend to do.

As we skirted around the Baptistery Gjergj boasted of a plan to cover it with a roof equipped with solar panels, which would, somehow, keep it heated and dry and permit

the pavement to be displayed. The European Union would pay for the contraption. It took little imagination to appreciate that this was exactly what the European Union would do. I nodded and trusted the infernal bureaucracy would defeat the project. But my companion winced in pain and launched into an assault on the idea that was so vehement that Gjergj froze stiff, as though he had inadvertently mislaid a fortune.

I encouraged us to walk on and we passed through the Great Basilica, an oasis flooded with sunlight in the dense woodland. Here, in years to come, oblivious to the romance of the wood, a group of Italian researchers were to propose a new roof to make a museum. Better here, on the path - they were to address me - than in the castle on the acropolis, far away.

On we walked, following the dark passage beside the Hellenistic wall to a point on the brink of Lake Butrint and its sleeping mussel beds. Out in the still water a fisherman was working with nets. Gjergj's speeded up, past the Scaean Gate, where Ugolini briefly convinced himself Aeneas entered the city, and onto the Lion Gate, where in May 1959 Khrushchev, according to Hoxha, whispered to his Defence minister that this was a great place for a nuclear submarine base. We dipped below the *tympanum* depicting a lion in shallow relief savaging a bull, climbed the steps past the sacred well dedicated by Junia Rufina - a second-century noble-woman - to the memory of the nymphs, and clambered up the mossy steps to a rising path above the mussel-fishermen's harbour. Far below us the curtain of towered walls sketched in 1857 by Edward Lear ran down through still reeds to the dark rim of water. Turning onto the acropolis, and now sweating, we followed the track to the spine of the hill immediately above the theatre.

Gjergj then proposed we take a boat out onto the lake. A fisherman with a green vessel made himself available. He rowed us standing through the rusting line of an old state fish trap, its posts angled every which way. A young man in torn clothes hung from the weir to unravel the metal grid gate that permitted us to slip onwards towards Lake Butrint. Then past

greying men with lines, we sailed onwards into the open water. Here we carved a path through the water past the concrete mussel beds, their sides pocked with holes from which dried grasses – the remains of nests – carefreely emerged. On to a distant shore below the steep flank of Kalivo.

Our gondolier propelled the heavy boat with all his force onto the pebble beach, then bounded over the boat's high sides into the water and, grappling with the raised prow, dragged us inwards. The urgent current, however, countered his efforts, causing the boat to rock. Kosta could not contain himself. He now leapt out, sinking to his stomach in the water, and helped to secure the boat ashore. All the while Gjergj sat hunched, motionless until instructed to disembark. Then we followed. Nearly half a mile of beach separated us from our destination, but almost at once Gjergj stopped to gaze at the intruding plastic bottles left by villagers picnicking here. Reaching down, he grasped one and turned to us as he did: "When we were children and found these on our beaches, our parents said they were made by men from space. Now, in two years, they are everywhere". Was he angry or simply marvelling at change? He left us to decide as he stepped forward.

Kosta meanwhile had taken off his trousers and shirt to reveal long, pressed boxer shorts, and with unexpected vanity plunged into the lake. Now released from our company, he skimmed like a teenager along twenty or so yards out from us. Our gondolier smiled. Having manoeuvred the rocking boat out into the wind-whipped water, yelled at him: "*Koçi, Koçil!*" Kosta took no notice of the guttural affection. Astrid did, though. Almost envious of his liberty, he paused to inform us that Kosta had been a swimming champion but smoked too much now.

Gjergj had reached an inlet opposite a ramshackle fishing weir. As he did, on the bank five yards away a white mongrel bounded out and baring its teeth, barked ferociously at us until an old man appeared. He eyed us, shouted at the dog, which whimpered, advanced without a word to his pontoon boat and, concentrating,

with one push of his pole, reached us. We bypassed the snivelling dog and the dwelling with its drifting wood-smoke, and once more came alongside Kosta. Gjergj pointed to the ruin on the far shore, and perhaps, feeling challenged by Kosta's exhibition, he accelerated so that we arrived first.

This was Diaporit. A single angle of a Roman building remained, a finger of resistant brick and tile some 10 metres high. It was all that bespoke the promise of the site, a Roman villa that occupied a grassy hillside extending down to the lake, with thin-mortared walls running into the water. Kosta, now more confident after his aquatic bravado, advanced towards us with some water-rolled sherds from the shoreline. "East Mediterranean," he said, handing me the pieces. Indeed they were.

We walked back at some pace, retracing our steps to the fisherman with an eye on his mongrel. Then up through the thick thorns to reach the rudimentary cyclopean wall of the Kalivo, the hog-backed hill that separated us from Butrint. Picking up the track, Gjergj urged us to be vigilant for snakes. Faintly pink anemones carpeted the open flank of the hill from where the ancient city came into view, a woody knot in the grey hillslope beyond. An hour later, following the channel, now thoroughly ruffled by the wind, we reached Butrint and, more to the point, the restaurant famed for its mussels.

The British ambassador had enthusiastically commended the mussels served on skewers. Apparently the waters were too sulphurous by EU standards for mussels; but nevertheless, since Soviet times, if not long before, these had been a staple here. Part concealed in patches along the Vivari Channel we had passed bare-foot fishermen cooking the shells to release their contents. Butrint's restaurant at this time was their only client.

We sat at reinforced concrete tables on reinforced concrete benches, relics of Albturizmo, the (communist) state tourist authority. Served by a tall elegant young woman with a long ponytail, we ate mussels, crayfish and fresh fish with under-heated chips larded with oil and a Greek salad of sorts. Gjergj spoke

mostly. He reminisced about the French School of Archaeology in Athens, then of Paris where he had been in the 1980s on a scholarship. He

had even persuaded his minder to accompany him to a concert by Madonna. Such mischief had been a highlight of his life.

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