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Topic of the Year: The Sublime Triangle

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Saranda 1998: A vision for Butrint and other cultural heritage strategies

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Twenty years ago, while Albania was just recovering from its Pyramid Crisis, at a meeting in a cafe in Saranda, the Butrint National Park was born. An outstanding achievement at that time, the Park still represents a milestone in the protection of Albania's cultural and natural heritage, as well as a source of wealth for the entire region. Richard Hodges, the leading actor in the process that culminated in the Park's creation, narrates how it all came about. In the first issue of this Journal, Hodges has told us of his first encounter in 1993 with Butrint and the Albanian soul - and contradictions; he now presents to our readers the second episode of his intriguing Albanian saga.

3 Open Access

Neywords: Albania, Butrint, Richard Hodges

Twenty years have passed since this moment captured on film in a bar in Saranda (Figure 1). The bleached photograph is almost all that records the meeting that changed Butrint, ancient *Buthrotum*, forever. It marks the beginnings of the Butrint National Park and the improbable safeguarding of Albania's premier archaeological site.



Fig. 1. Workshop participants. Saranda April 1998.

We rarely took photographs of ourselves in that pre-digital age. The photograph shows (left to right) Reshad Gega, then Director of the Albanian Institute of Archaeology, Nicholas Stanley Price, then teaching Cultural Heritage Practice in the University of London, me, Telemark Llakhana, Will Bowden, and, kneeling, Guri Pani and Sally Martin. We look dazed or at least a little surprised as we posed for an unknown

photographer. Nicholas was the facilitator of the workshop to create a park at Butrint sponsored by the Getty Grant Program. Sally, the Butrint Foundation's project manager, aided him. Guri was Reshad's (e.g. the Albanian state's) point person to oversee Butrint, an architect who had restored many of its monuments during the communist period together with the ever dependable Telemark, known as Tele, a Sarandabased surveyor (Hodges & Paterlini 2013, pp. 253-279). Will was then a fellow at the British School at Rome working on the finds from our troubled 1994-96 excavations at Butrint, halted by Albania's civil war in January 1997, known as the Pyramid Crisis.

Me: I had resigned as Director of the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, and had been appointed Scientific Director of the Butrint Foundation by its trustees, Lords Rothschild and Sainsbury. They encouraged me to accelerate a vision to protect Butrint in the aftermath of Albania's unrest. The Saranda workshop at Easter 1998 did just that. As things worked out, during the course of the meeting I encountered three groups of Italians that represent three different approaches to cultural heritage: the visionary, the imperial and the corrupt.

The making of a park of some kind to protect Butrint's Mediterranean setting was first put before Albania's Prime Minister, Fatos Nano,



Fig. 2. Seafront promenade at Saranda, 1990s.

when he visited London in December 1997. He and his entourage came to a dinner at the Prince's Institute of Architecture where I was then working. On this dark night Lords Rothschild and Sainsbury made welcoming speeches and the inscrutable Nano replied in stilted jargon. Nano was not impressive; nor were his associates. One of his ministers assiduously groped the Countess von Bismarck, a willowy Prussian blond, throughout the long dinner. The lords were not amused.

None of us grasped how incomprehensible our objectives to turn the archaeological site of Butrint into a park were to the government and its apparatchiks. If we had asked to buy Butrint, Nano would have agreed. If we had offered to purchase all its statues or its mosaics, I have no doubt now he would have acceded too. But to protect the site to help encourage tourism and new employment in Albania? It made no sense to the post-communist politicians out to get rich fast. New hotels, strip malls, a marina and helicopter-pad were better solutions, was their unstated riposte. Besides, after five years of democracy, punctuated by a bitter civil war, Albania had far more urgent issues to resolve than its cultural heritage and tourist strategies.

Being our guests, Nano and his entourage nodded to our solution that protecting Butrint's spirit of place would in time become a huge asset. Surely, you could see these sub-communist politicians cogitating, there was an English colonial sub-plot secreted behind the enthusiasm for the place?

The ball was in our court. With support from the Getty Grant Program, we staged a workshop in Saranda in April 1998. A year after the Anarchy, our aim was to find agreement for our objectives at Butrint. What kind of park? We needed to identify its principal significance.



Fig. 3. Saranda and its bay, c. 2000.



Fig. 4. Baptistery mosaic pavement - cover it or leave it under sand.

To do this, we invited a Noah's Ark of Albanian and foreign delegates to a pre-Easter charrette. Representatives came from Unesco, the World Bank, the Albanian Foreign Office, the Institute of Monuments and Saranda City Council. The Minister of Culture, Arta Dade herself, attended, accompanied by a lady-in-waiting, as did a group of British and Italian experts. A senior World Bank duo, Tia Duer and her deputy, Frank Penna, arrived first. Tall with a mane of long braided hair, Tia was one arm of World Bank President James Wolfensohn's new initiative to support cultural heritage in emerging economies. Frank Penna was an aging consultant that reminded me of a gnarled Cia official in a Hollywood drama, constantly in thrall to the prospect of corruption (he was probably well informed and therefore right!). I also included my friends, Riccardo Francovich and Daniele Manacorda from Siena University.

In our minds was a vision. Butrint had a spirit of place which needed to be protected. At Rocca San Silvestro in western Tuscany, facing similar if different predatory odds, Riccardo Francovich had made a mining park on the low hills dominated by a spectacular deserted 12th century Pisan village. A museum with a reception area lay at the entrance of this park, then two years

old, with trails and transport to take the visitor through wild landscapes up to the eerie esplanade dominated by the excavated medieval village. The old quarry using this landscape was dying; the park offered hope for the local communities. The spectre of unemployment in Francovich's vision would be mitigated by tourism. Drawing upon Riccardo's help, we had much the same aims at Butrint. This middle-ranking Graeco-Roman site, we calculated, should not become one of those archaeological destinations where tourists were fed a diet of vulgar history in a hot, incomprehensible maze of ruins. Instead, remembering my first view of Lake Butrint some five years earlier, its spirit had the potential to lend identity even to wild Albania.

The first morning of the Saranda meeting focused upon what made Butrint special (Figures 2 & 3). Gathered in the Bar Byzantion on the seafront promenade (on Saranda, ancient Onchesmos, see Hodges 2007; Chiles 2017), aided by two translators, Nicholas Stanley Price and I led the proceedings. We tried to convey the idea of significance and how this might be connected to leveraging Butrint's identity. Once established as a brand, we proposed, tourists would come. This in turn would generate all manner of economic development. The connection was



Fig. 5. Minister Arta Dade at Butrint to receive a stolen bust, 2003.

plainly lost on many in our audience who had come to enjoy Saranda in the spring. Still, we ploughed on.

Following lunch, we invited the Albanian delegates to break into four focus groups and rank what they most appreciated about the site. We had no preconceptions. Could it be

Butrint's theatre, or the baptistery (Figure 4), or the triangular castle? Even the Minister of Culture herself, Arta Dade, participated. Arta was not in good spirits (Figure 5). She was well aware that she was about to be axed from Nano's government ostensibly for an inopportune relationship, but largely so Nano, true to his idiosyncratic Balkan machismo, could exercise his patrician authority.

The delegates listed their ranked ideas on big sheets of paper, talking and smoking with intense commitment. After an hour, the clouds of smoke thick in the room, Sally collected the sheet belonging to each group. There then followed the conjuror's moment, beloved of facilitators at workshops. Nicholas invited a spokesman from each group to tell us their conclusion. As the spokes-person talked, Sally pinned their sheet to the wall. Her mischievous smile revealed her thrill that all the Albanians, whatever their station or financial circumstances, had been lured towards much the same conclusion. Seated on plastic chairs in the arena of the bar, the Albanians were fascinated that the four groups had alighted upon the same reasons for protecting Butrint: Butrint was magical and mysterious (Figure 6). From this acorn, the Butrint Foundation fostered an oak tree.



Fig. 6. Butrint. Straits of Corfu from Monte Mile.

"Why," I asked Reshad afterwards?

Speaking in fluent Italian, he explained that all the Albanians at those tables had shared the same experience. Before 1991, under the communists, the ancient site was off-limits, in a no-man's land next to the Greek border. Greek communist exiles were settled in the villages around Butrint to stop anyone fleeing Albania to Greece. To arrive at Butrint, every person who had been in the focus groups had had to get a visa of sorts and convince the guards in the customs post, now deserted, by a barred gate stationed on the road 5 kms south of Saranda where Lake Butrint begins (located where the Hellenistic, Byzantine and Venetian Dema Wall once separated the Ksamili peninsula and Butrint from points to the north. See Hodges 2014).

"It was always magical. We were all taken on school-trips on buses there to see it. Here we ate fish. Cozze."

There was a lyricism to Reshad's explanation based upon Butrint's quirky liminality. It was an Albanian 'Other' when no-one was permitted to travel abroad. It had been bucolic, outside their caged world. Marine fishing was banned most everywhere by the dictator, Enver Hoxha, as the boats served as vehicles to escape. The mixture of salt-water fish from Butrint Lake, as well as the ruins under a woodland canopy, had all the ingredients of an idyll. Childhood memories had erased other priorities such as making money by exploiting development potential around the celebrated archaeological site. (Unstated but hanging over us was the fact that in safe times, immediately before the Pyramid Crisis, foreigners paid state officials handsomely for permits of all kinds).

Reashad's explanation also omitted reference to a seedier reality of late communism recorded by the venerable British traveller, Eric Newby:

"At Sarandë and Butrint, resorts on the Adriatic coast, across the channel from Corfu, wives or girlfriends of Party officials described to us by the interpreter as being 'workers on a day's holiday' wore beautifully cut, simple dresses that looked as if they had emanated from couture workrooms, pearl necklaces, gold-rimmed sunglasses, elegant shoes and carried handbags of soft leather, none of which were available in... Albania. When they went swimming at a place called Ksamil, on the coast between Sarandë and Butrint, well out of sight of real workers, it was in foreign-made bathing costumes, and one only had to look at their long, painted fingernails to

see that not only had they not participated in a month's obligatory agriculture within living memory, but that they had probably never worked what here in Albania is an official eighthour day" (Newby 1984, p. 133).

Had Reshad been one of the swains of these young women Newby despised? Chatting after the photograph was taken, I doubted it. He had always been a modest figure in Tirana life. I felt we had convinced Reshad of our vision for Butrint (I was to be proved wrong) and that in his case as in Arta's, sentimentality had won out, or rather spirit of place.

Not everyone was pleased with what had happened in the workshop. The grey shadow of Enver Hoxha lay across the room. Some conspiracy had occurred. A rotond, mean-eyed, Greek Albanian businessman – doubling as a Saranda councillor piped up. "We need to pump the water out of the theatre," he said, to break the ice that had formed around the concept of spirit of place (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Butrint Theatre - pump the water out.

Sally looked thrilled at the questioner's gall. Nicholas paused and with grace responded that the noise would dispel the magic. Then others weighed in. When someone suggested the same at the baptistery, we offered the same reply. This intangible catch-all gave us the thread around which the future (Butrint Foundation) Management Plan for the World Heritage Site would be woven. Nicholas then explained: 'magical or mystical' gave us the reason to propose a buffer zone around the existing archaeological site of Butrint, to protect its lagoonal 'Homeric' landscape (Figure 8). Everyone nodded, albeit some with profound reservations.

We summarised our workshop thus: kept more or less as we had found it, at a stroke this undeveloped landscape would lend fame

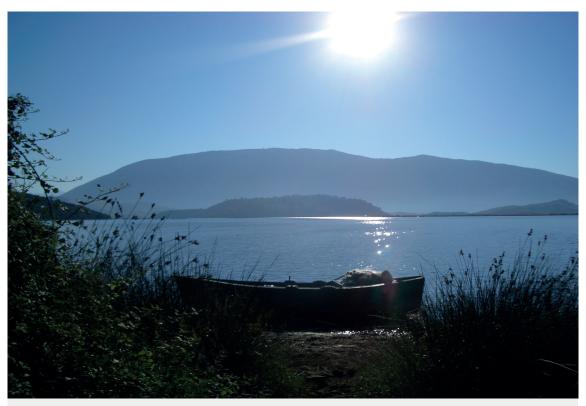


Fig. 8. Homeric landscape. Environs of Butrint- Kalivo from Butrint.

to Butrint as an eternal Mediterranean oasis, attracting tourists of all kinds. Simultaneously, the buffer zone, if inscribed by Unesco, would protect it from anonymous marinas, golf courses, and airports and anything else detrimental to the spirit of the place. The revised Unesco inscription of Butrint including the buffer zone was adopted at the Fez meeting in December 1999, and ratified by the Albanian government in March 2000 (Figures 9 & 10).

Meanwhile, as we dissected the meeting to shape a strategy, Arta Dade lost her ministerial position to Edi Rama, the artist who a year earlier had been brutally assaulted by Berisha's henchmen wielding baseball bats. Arta hastened for Tirana in her black chauffeur-driven limousine, visibly distraught.

Then reality intruded. Visions are one thing, but Albania at that time was an avatar of a state and all manner of challenges were confronting it. The quickening pulse was infinitely quixotic.

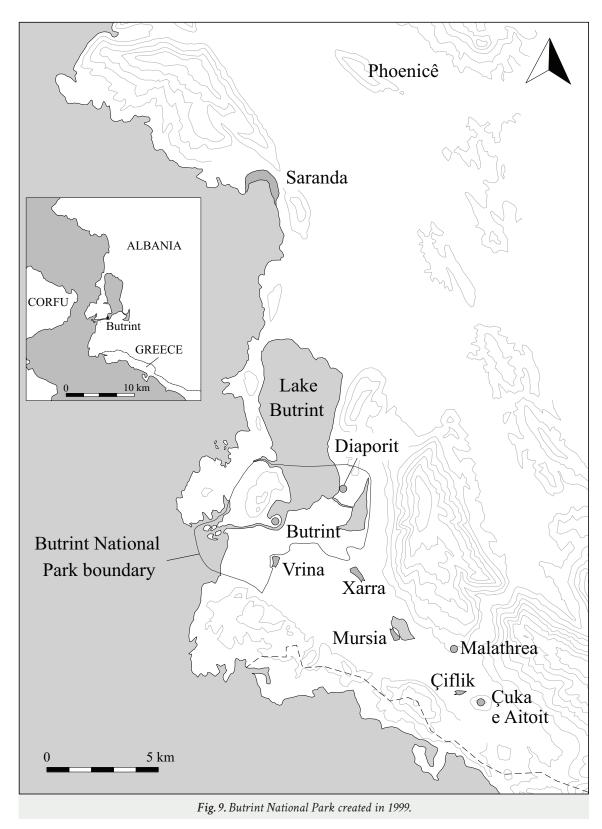
Minutes after the workshop closed, Mrs. Cristina Busi, an Italian business-woman who owned the Coca-Cola franchise in Albania and then was about to bottle Tepelene spring water, arrived in a convoy of armoured land-cruisers with earnest assistants from the Ravenna festival. She had insisted on a meeting with us

as representatives of the Butrint Foundation. The Italians, as ever, were immaculately dressed and made us aware of it. Mrs. Busi wasted no time on pleasantries. Did we own Butrint, a place associated with their Virgil, she asked in a languid but heavily accented English?

Her intention was to promote the site and their new mineral water. There would be a Butrint Festival. Rothschild could pay too, she asserted. They would have a great conductor stage a concert with a Tirana orchestra. The tame maestro was then introduced to us. Journalists would be drawn to this orbit like moths to a flame. Her intent was brutally compelling: this base land would provide water and wealth, and she would promote this at other's expense at Butrint. An *ethos* so different from Francovich's: greed plus contempt and glamour summed up her nationalist attitude to cultural heritage.

Then the penny dropped. I informed her that Rothschild did not own the archaeological site. Her mask fell and, barely concealing her disgust, she swept away like a vulture aching to feast on whatever she could as fast as she could. Her armoured column roared off to its next destination: the new Minister of Culture, Butrint's proprietor.

Mrs. Busi and her like viewed democratic



Albania as a missing part of their Empire – a kind of ill-fated *regione* like Sardinia or Sicily. Such buccaneers had ill-concealed contempt for the Albanians and simultaneously a desire

to expediently exploit whatever was readily possible before the opportunity dissolved with ordered democracy. Hardly oligarchs as we've come to know them, these were Berlusconi's

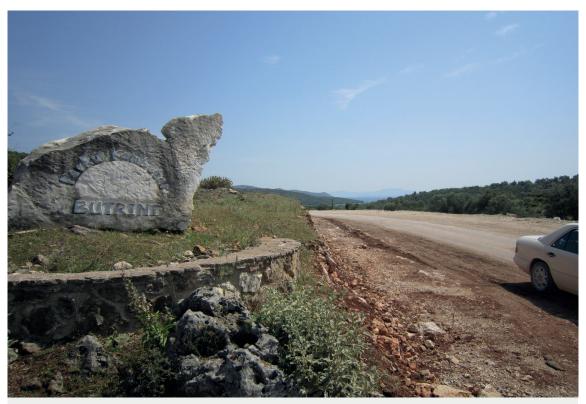


Fig. 10. Butrint National Park sign at Ksamili, 2010.

self-regarding progeny, out to cherry-pick the treasures of Albania's culture. Mrs. Busi was not alone, though she would not have given the time of day to two Italians engaged in another cultural heritage venture...

The two emblematic gold-diggers crossed my path no sooner than the imperious Mrs. Busi had driven out of sight. On leaving Saranda aboard the little rusting ferry, the Mimosa, following the workshop, I noted two fellow passengers whom I had seen arriving the week before with a lustrous black Range Rover and a silver Mercedes. Now on foot, tussle haired and cocky, they were evidently car thieves and not shy about it. Once on deck, they tore up their Albanian exit visas, contemptuously destroying any trace of their trip, scattering the pieces of card into Saranda's harbour as the oily plume of smoke from the ferry's funnels drifted over us. Their kit bags were from Foggia, northern Apulia, and they chattered cheerily like old women as the boat ploughed its way through heavy seas. What, I wondered, would the Greek customs make of these two? How would they deal with their two missing limousines recorded in their passports?

My curiosity aroused, I eased up close in the little customs' line in Corfu harbour, keen to

hear the upshot. The testy Greek officers, racist to a man as far as the Albanians were concerned, politely enquired what the two ragazzi had been doing. The taller responded crisply: they had been involved in conserving churches. No further words were needed. True or false how good of these Latins to tend to orthodox churches in the land of infidels, was unstated. With this magic formula, the car thieves strolled on. When I told this story a year later in front of the EU customs inspector in Albania - an officer from Palermo no less - she exploded at the improbability of my insulting story. Only the Albanians - by then per capita world leaders in the ownership of Mercedes - could be held responsible for the theft of cars. But, inimitably, she declined to explain, how it was that the cars were driven through the Albanian ports monitored at EU expense by her (Italian) staff.

Three 'visions' of cultural heritage for the Saranda region and its magical, prized Unesco World Heritage site, Butrint. At that moment, hope for our vision reinforced by the outcome of the workshop lay with one man. Ministerial and mercurial, he was a tall basket-ball player intrigued to experiment with the past in the struggle to create Albania's future: Edi Rama.

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