Wag the Dog?
Archaeology, reality and virtual reality in a virtual country

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Albania is a virtual country where past and present are inextricably linked. In some ways it is the perfect example of Benedict Anderson's famous definition of a nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). Since 1993, the Butrint Foundation and the University of East Anglia have been undertaking a collaborative research project in Albania, at the ancient site of Butrint.

Butrint lies in the very south of the country, some 25 kilometres from the nearest border crossing into Greece, and almost within swimming distance of the Ionian island of Corfu, across the straits. The heart of the ancient city is situated on a wooded hill at the very end of the Ksamili peninsular. To the east lies the expanse of Lake Butrint, an unspoilt freshwater lake that is the product of a once great inlet of the Ionian Sea, which, from the Bronze age onwards, provided access to the interior of Epirus. The lake is now joined to the sea by the Vivari channel, and to the south a long valley extends towards the Greek frontier. Butrint, therefore, lies at a strategic crossroads, close to the mouth of the Adriatic on one of the traditional termini of the crossing from Italy to the Balkans. Butrint's history, like that of Albania as a whole, has been profoundly affected by its crucial location.

With this presentation I wish to explore some of the issues of context and interpretation that are relevant to a major international site like Butrint. I shall be looking from the point of view of an archaeologist who has been closely involved over the course of eight years with the research and interpretation of the ancient city and its surroundings.

Archaeology and the construction of identity in Albania

'We are the descendants of the Illyrian tribes. Into the land of our ancestors have come the Greeks, the Romans, the Normans, the Slavs, the Angevins, the Byzantines, the Venetians, the Ottomans and numerous other invaders, without having been able to destroy the ancient Illyrian civilisation and later the Albanians' (Enver Hoxha 1985, discourse at Shkodër 1979).

Butrint is a microcosm of the whole of Albania (Ceka 1999). Its history stretches back to the Bronze Age and the renegade Trojan Aeneas, founder of the Roman race, who, according to Vergil, founded a miniature copy of his mother city at Butrint. The myth was the basis of the first archaeological work to be undertaken at Butrint. Between 1924 and 1943, Benito Mussolini's government sponsored a substantial archaeological mission, in order to prove the prior presence of 'Romans' in the form of Aeneas' compatriots, and so to stake a claim to this section of the eastern seaboard of the Adriatic (Gilkes and Miraj 2000).

Trojans or not, the reality of this situation is that of a complex prehistoric past, with a series of cultural groups existing throughout the first two millennia BC. There are substantial differences between the prehistoric cultures in the different regions of Albania; and although Butrint particularly, and southern Albania generally, has strong cultural similarities with the Adriatic coast of Italy, yet it is commonly grouped by scholars with that group of prehistoric cultures which occurs throughout the western Balkans and is equated with the Illyrians.

Outside influence has always been a strong factor in the region's development. Corinthian Greek colonies were established along the coast, Apollonia and Dyracchium (the modern port of Durrës), and interaction with the indigenous population promoted social and economic development. Southern Albania, once part of the kingdom of Epirus, was in continuous contact with the Hellenised states to the south. By the 2nd century BC the expanding frontiers of the Roman state encompassed Albania and Butrint, and Rome's conquest of Macedonia and the Hellenic kingdoms of the near east underscored Butrint's strategic position.

Neither was the importance of this position to diminish in the middle age: the later Roman world and its Byzantine successor maintained a tenuous hold on the Adriatic seaboard until the 13th century, though the maelstrom of ethnic mixing in the interior of the Balkans undoubtedly left its effects on southern Albania. Short lived crusader states dependent on the polities of southern Italy were carved out during the 13th and 14th centuries, while the rest of the fragmented Balkan peninsular began to be absorbed by the growing power of the Ottoman Turks. Butrint's history took a slightly different course. While in northern Albania George Kastrioti Skanderbeg, Albania's national hero, fought the Turks to a standstill for 25 years during the 15th century, Butrint had passed under the dominion of the Venetian Republic, where it formed an outstation of the fortress on Corfu. This was more or less the situation that obtained up until the 19th century and the waning of Turkish power. Butrint was a side-show of the Napoleonic Wars, being held only briefly by the French, before becoming part of the newly declared sate of Albania in 1913 – the last of the Balkan nationalist movements to give rise to a nation state.

To be able to interpret and reconstruct the site it is important to appreciate the historical context of Albania as a state in the 20th century, and its attitude to archaeological and cultural sites. Its principal collective experience is that of interaction with outside groups, sometimes peacefully, but also in conflict. The Second World War was the last of these great interventions, with occupation by both Italy and Germany (Fischer 2000), though since 1992 another sort of intervention has affected the country as it adjusts to contact with the outside world, following 50 years of isolation under the communists.

The exploitation of the past was a major underpinning of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist state. While pushing forward major schemes of economic and educational development, Hoxha tackled the problem of internal disunity that had crippled all previous Albanian governments, by a mixture of force and clever manipulation of identity. Archaeology and cultural monuments became one of the principal underpinnings of the regime. Emphasis was placed on the perceived cultural and racial continuity between the prehistoric Illyrians and the Albanians of medieval and modern times. This justified the political isolation of the country from outside

influences. Hoxha's alliances with other socialist states – Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Mao's China – between 1948 and 1975, provided tightly controlled investment and cultural contacts. Each of these links suffered from Hoxha's consuming fear of ideological contamination or domination by external powers, and each was consequently abandoned.

In these xenophobic conditions, archaeology and the protection of cultural monuments was correspondingly well resourced and became a high status profession controlled by two professional institutes. Butrint occupied a particular place here. Its geographical location was again important, as southern Albania once formed part of the Hellenised land of Epirus, and was within a region inhabited by an ethnic Greek minority to which a residual Greek claim remained. It became a test case in the creation of a unified Albanian identity. Apparently inspired by interpretations of Butrint, a tourist phrasebook issued to foreign visitors from 1981 – a sort of extended list of permitted questions and answers – includes the following exchange: 'Q: what have you found A: Our excavations have proved the Illyrian-Albanian continuity'!

From the late 1970s, Butrint became a tourist destination to which well-managed groups of foreigners were brought by Albturist, the state travel organisation responsible for tours of the country's cultural heritage (Hall 1984). From the 1980's the nascent archaeological park first created by the Italians in the 1930s, was enhanced with new facilities. And by 1989, Albania attracted 14 000 visitors a year, as the need for hard currency to sustain the ailing Stalinist system prompting increased investment in tourism (Vickers 1995).

As a tourist destination the natural environment of Butrint is certainly photogenic. Archaeologically speaking, Butrint contains monuments of all periods of Albanian history, including possible Bronze-Age fortifications and Hellenic theatres and temples – as well as Roman houses and early Christian monuments such as the baptistery, with its great circular pavement. Additionally, a museum was set up in the Venetian castle on the acropolis of Butrint, which had previously been reconstructed by the Italians.

The making of a National Park

The fall of the communist regime in 1991 was accompanied by chaos and violence, and resulted in the destruction of the country's hard-won infrastructure. By 1994, Albania was in a state of near total economic and social collapse. Under these circumstances, tourism offered one of only a very few viable ways of generating income to revive the country's ruined economy.

The cultural importance of the site was recognised by the recognition of Butrint as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992. However, this development was due to the initiative of UNESCO alone; the corresponding Albanian protective legislation was not enacted until much later. The significance of UNESCO was limited, given that the limits of the protected site were restricted to the very tip of the peninsular, the area of the old park, and given that the archaeological and natural environments are far more extensive. Geophysical prospection in the area to the south of the Butrint channel, for

example, has clarified the morphology of the city; and a substantial ancient urban agglomeration has been identified in fields formerly used by the state farm.

Once again, Butrint's location was a prime factor in the concept of developing a modern National Park. Its proximity to the tourist island of Corfu, with 30 000 bed spaces and over a million visitors a year, provides Butrint with a ready-made external market. Indeed, by 1996, 20 000 visitors visited Albania from Corfu annually – most with the express intention of seeing Butrint. The local port of Saranda acts as gateway for a short and relatively easy journey by sea from Corfu Town.

There was renewed civil unrest in 1997, when the south of the country revolted against the central government in Tirana; consequently, Albania's achievements were once again undone. That said, since 1998 foreign visitors have once again been visiting in increasing numbers. This trend can only be helped by increased investment in infrastructure, and cross-border contacts with northern Greece, a region of the European Union that also stands in need of investment. A number of roads have been rebuilt (most notably the Saranda-Butrint road), and further long distance routes are planned, including further cross-border routes to Greece. Regional Greek organisations, such as the Epirus-Egnatia Foundation, are keen to see further links created and have embraced the medium of the internet and multimedia CD publishing to this end (Egnatia Tourism Multimedia Lab).

Also significant is the dramatic rise in internal tourism. Holidaymakers from other regions of Albania – particularly Tirana, where almost half of the national population now lives – have provided a strong market for the boom in new hotels and restaurants. Butrint now receives over 30 000 visitors a year, both Albanian and foreign tourists, school parties and other groups. The pressures of development are consequently strong. Already two hotels/restaurants have been built within proximity to the main site, both with official permission, while the nearby village of Hexsamili, formerly the centre of a state fruit farm under the communists, with a population of 400 workers, is now a town with a population of 6000, and a tourism resort to compete with Saranda. This development is good and necessary, but its uncontrolled continuation will result in the destruction of Butrint as a special site within the region and remove the possibility of sustainable development. The effects of a rush to mass tourism are clearly to be seen elsewhere. Visitors to Pompeii, for example, have to fight their way past touts and cars to enter this 'preserved ancient city', in reality a sadly neglected ruin of the last 250 years. Corfu itself has also suffered from the race to construct wall-to-wall hotels.

To this end the Butrint Foundation has encouraged the creation of a protected zone around the core site of Butrint and the creation of a management strategy. Support has been forthcoming from relevant international organisations, the World Monuments Fund and the World Bank; and UNESCO has recognised the importance of the initiative by inscribing a further zone around the original core site of Butrint to the status of a World Heritage Site in 1999. By 2001, an agreed management strategy had been produced – the result of extensive consultation with local and national bodies – and an effective park management structure put in place (Martin 2001). A sustained push for further legislative change to safeguard these developments is underway.

Butrint and its immediate environs could sustain an estimated 190 000 visitors per annum without endangering the site or its monuments. An active promotional programme supports conventional tourist advertising, and increased links with the official tourist bodies on the island of Corfu. Despite the possibilities of mutual co-operation, relations between the island and the mainland have in the past been soured by political differences, and the turmoil within Albanian following the fall of the communist regime. A regular series of events are held at Butrint, an annual concert of traditional Albanian flute music takes place is staged in the ancient theatre, and Butrint has played host to the national beauty contest, 'Miss Shiqperia'.

Archaeology and development

Butrint therefore exists in a rather vicarious reality where essential 'real' meaning, the interaction with the everyday life of Albanians and their needs and desires, and the perceived meaning of its past are interchangeable. One thing is certain – the need to optimise the exploitation of the site as a resource. Exploitation is an emotive term that, in a historical context, implies an image of the deliberate and perhaps cynical promotion of the past. Nevertheless, in the current European political context, the past must serve the present, as Mao Tse Tung dictated. Resources for research archaeology are increasingly scarce and the days when archaeologists could focus entirely on the academic impact of their work are past. Archaeological managers and their parent organisations world wide now insist that the wider implications of archaeological work are considered. In Italy, an archaeological concession granted from the Ministry of Culture and the archaeological superintendency now requires that a financial plan for conservation and interpretation be submitted along with an academic programme. The days of 'dig and run' archaeology are over. Archaeologists are now being asked to consider the ongoing implications of their research and how to mitigate and if necessary develop these effects. The case of crumbling Pompeii, mentioned above, goaded the Italian government to make the site independent of the state archaeological machinery, in an attempt to create the conditions for the salvation of this World Heritage Site. The principal motives behind this were the possibilities for fiscal and administrative independence resulting from an annual turnover of three million visitors. The archaeology was to be exploited to ensure its own survival.

The increasingly important requirement to demonstrate public benefit, as with grants made through the National Heritage Memorial fund in the United Kingdom, for example, has stymied archaeologists. How does one prove the public benefit of excavation? Certainly some archaeological projects can be construed as programmes that directly benefit a public at large. A classic example from the 1980s was the UNESCO-sponsored Libyan Valleys Survey. The archaeological research was hitched to an experiment in sustainable development, by investigating the extensive remains of settled agriculture in the Libyan pre-desert. The underlying motive was the possibility of re-establishing effective sustainable farming of these areas as a long-term strategy for the development of Libya in a post-oil scenario. The research employed a whole battery of environmental, geographical, historical and archaeological techniques (Barker 1996). In this environment, exploitation is not too strong a term to use. Archaeologists ignore this political and social need at their peril.

Thus national and international investment and development organisations are increasingly looking at archaeology as an integral element in their programmes. This is partly as a result of a need to find an easily developed resource that can be tapped to provide hard currency income in underdeveloped regions. The rise in adventure and specialist tourism feeds this particular thrust. In addition, there is a rising interest in the whole problem of how development programmes are designed and enacted. Organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank are by their nature beauracracies first and foremost; and as such they have come in for considerable criticism, some of it justified, which has been directed at the inertia that delays and hinders active intervention or conversely results in heavy-handed and inappropriate execution. Many of these difficulties are related to the question of human and national identity. As has been outlined above in relation to Albania, this idea of identity is itself a construct, but one that manifests itself as a powerful and emotive force. Supra-national bodies are intrigued by archaeology, as it promises to provide a means by which they can engage with the whole concept of identity at a practical level, and so contribute to a successful resolution of their ongoing programmes.

This surely must be a paradigm for archaeology in the 21st century. Archaeology becomes a driving element in a holistic approach to ancient sites, offering opportunities for economic and social development, training and education – as well as sustaining the intrinsic value of academic research.

Archaeology and Virtual Reality

How, then, can virtual reality contribute to the maintenance and development of sites such as Butrint? It would be as well here to examine the relationship between archaeology and virtual reconstruction in its many forms.

The principal point to note is that, at the fundamental level, the principal interest of archaeologists in any form of reconstruction is in their accuracy and analytical value. Reconstructing the buildings they excavate has always intrigued archaeologists. This varies from actual rebuilding of structures, such as the temple of Cyrenean Zeus in Libya, completely re-erected by an Italian mission from its shattered remains to paper exercises. Total reconstruction is now in any case frowned upon (Schmidt 1999) but graphic reconstructions have a long tradition. Amongst the earliest examples include Austin Henry Layard's attempts to reconstruct the Assyrian palaces he excavated at Nimrud and Nineveh during the 1840s (Layard 1853, frontispiece). Also significant, in terms of the scope of its vision, was the project undertaken by Luigi Canina for Pope Pius IX in the 1850s (Canina 1853) (Figs. 10-11). Anxious to preserve the remains of the Appian Way, the 'Queen of Roads' Canina was commissioned to survey the monuments along its length, which he did most effectively before producing 'before' and 'after' drawings of the ruins and their proposed reconstructions. Even today this offers one of the most complete and evocative reconstructions of a Roman landscape ever undertaken.

The modern doyen of this form of accurate recreation of buildings and monuments was Sheila Gibson, sadly recently deceased, whose work was always based firmly on the actual remains and the weight that could be placed upon available evidence (Gibson 1991). Many other reconstructions are visually more appealing, such as the

pictures of Alan Sorrell still to be seen at English Heritage sites throughout the United Kingdom (Sorrell 1981), for example, though few can claim to be an interpretative analysis of how a building functioned.

This interest also manifested itself in models and three-dimensional reconstructions. The model of the city centre at Pompeii, which is still to be seen in the National Museum in Naples, represents the actual excavations of the area of the forum up until the early 19th century. Likewise the models of prehistoric sites in Dorset, produced under the direction of General Pitt-Rivers in the later 19th century, lie at the beginning of a tradition in giving physical representation to archaeological data.

Most of these models were produced, if not by architects, then by archaeologists working in close collaboration with them. Indeed, up until fairly recently an architect was considered to be an essential participant in any excavation project dealing with structural remains.

The ultimate interpretative model must be that created partly by the Italian architect Italo Gismondi, representing the entire city of Rome in the 4th century AD. This is now housed in the Mueso della Civiltá Romana in Rome; it is a creation of the era of Mussolini, and was intended to display the glory of the Roman world. This is in many ways the first virtual museum – nothing within it is real – and reconstructed clothing, armour, machines, and even mosaics are its exhibits. These elements of Roman life are accompanied by models, casts and reconstructions of houses, siegeworks, public buildings and statues – perhaps the largest single collection of such objects ever to have been assembled. The great model of Rome, as large as a football pitch, occupies a single huge gallery at the very end of the visitor trail. In one of the biggest uses of virtual reconstructions of recent years, Ridley Scott's film Gladiator, tribute is paid by the new technology to the old where the opening of the Rome sequences uses the model of Rome in a fade-in introduction!

The point here is that reconstructions, which are all virtual given the nature of the data upon which they are based, are nothing new in the context of public presentation. It may be claimed with some justification that none of the above examples offer the scope or possibilities of virtual reality, but then the power of virtual reality is itself seldom matched by the imagination of the observer of any model or picture; the ability to imagine oneself to be 'actually there'.

Added to this is the generic problem of any solution based on information technology – maintenance. Whilst a static model is always operational, often the terminals and equipment associated with virtual reality are often to be found dead and lifeless in the sites and museums where they are emplaced. This problem is of course exacerbated in a country like Albania, where technical expertise is at a premium. Inappropriate or gratuitous uses of technology are seen by archaeologists as a major black mark against virtual reality. A site like Butrint, or indeed Pompeii, can and should speak for itself in actual physical terms. The beauty, drama, and suggestive nature of ruins in a landscape are not really enhanced by on-site 3D, or tablet computer guidebooks, nor are they necessarily better interpreted for the presence of such things.

The dog wags the tail

What then is the appropriate place of virtual reality in the context of a site such as Butrint? Some experimentation with virtual models of one particular monument at Butrint, the baptistery, has already been undertaken (http://www.virtualheritage.net/news).

A virtual reconstruction is essentially the same as any conventional archaeological publication – it presents the results of research. The fundamental difference is that it is an environment that can be manipulated in the way that paper and model representations cannot be. As an interpretative tool this is vital, permitting, for example, the archaeologist to examine the interplay of light within a social space, or the possibilities of the ebb and flow of crowds in public buildings. Currently these can be calculated or represented in a static manner, but not experienced. This interpretative element will become increasingly important as software becomes readily available. This is an important point as current packages are prohibitively expensive and time consuming for most archaeologists and heritage managers. This is especially true in developing countries such as Albania. More user-friendly interfaces are necessary before it is truly possible to employ virtual reality as an everyday tool of interpretation and display. Once these are available then opportunities to re-create entire buildings and cityscapes that can be explored and experienced by archaeologists and members of the public are opened up.

Electronic archives and access to data are another where archaeologists have feared to tread heavily. Within the United Kingdom electronic data storage has yet to become the norm, and many archives still rely on hard copy. But even here lie dangers, as electronically stored data are far from permanent. A recent report by the University of York revealed that uncurated electronic data decays at a faster rate even than paper archives. A survey of data from archaeological rescue projects in the London area showed that information stored on magnetic disks by now defunct organisations had lost up to 5% of its content through disk corruption. The World Wide Web offers yet another possibility for long-term storage of archive data. The Archaeology Data Service, founded by a consortium led by the University of York, was established specifically to advocate and assist the long-term curation of archaeological archives (http://intarch.ac.uk/ahds/welcome.html). The University of Siena in Italy has developed a GIS based archive for Tuscany (http://192.167.112.135/) that works at a number of different levels, permitting the basic archival material to be accessed right down to photographs and field documentation sheets for individual walls found on a given excavation.

However, the interfaces for these databases are conventional; that is, they are topographic or contextual. Virtual interfaces for archival data would add a truly interactive portal, so encouraging the user to play with data, or more simply, in the case of the general public, to play and experience. Geographical information systems are in any case moving towards visualising data in a 3-D format. An extensive archival research project has been undertaken for Butrint, so that the data resource includes not only the modern excavation data, but also that of our Italian and Albanian predecessors. The media varies from hand drawn plans to total station survey's, from film footage and audio interviews to notebooks and field documentation. A virtual reconstruction will permit the visitor to navigate the model and interrogate the data and the reconstruction from within.

As has been outlined above an essential consideration is the appropriate use of virtual reality and information technology. Based in a museum, an interpretation centre or university or school, it will become a crucial educational and research tool. An essential element – perhaps *the* essential element for the purposes of publicity and research – will be Internet availability. Sites in Albania – which already possesses many more terminals for the World Wide Web than it does libraries – and elsewhere must be accessible on-line. Albania's chequered history has stigmatised outside perceptions of the country as a bandit-ridden tyranny. Members of our team are still frequently asked whether the communists let visitors in! As an economic resource Butrint is one of the few places in southern Albanian that actually generates income rather than merely recycling it. Altering perceptions and maximising that income requires publicity. The experience of sites such as Ename in Belgium (http://www.enamecenter.org) show how the careful use of on-line and virtual data can increase the number of visitors. Experiencing a virtual Butrint can only be a spur for potential visitors to take the plunge and experience the reality.

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