RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN ALBANIA

Edited by I. Gjipoli, L. Përzhita and B. Muka

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Roman Relief Bowl from Corinth, No. HD09.5012.3, h. 4 cm, d. 5.7 cm, late 2nd-3rd century AD. AloA Gjirokastër
Hadrianopolis

Since 2005, the University of Macerata and the Institute of Archaeology of Tirana have collaborated in an extensive archaeological excavation of the Roman settlement of Hadrianopolis, situated near the modern village of Sotratika. This area, presently in the south of Albania, was part of the territory of Chaonia, and later of the territory of Epirus.

The investigations focused on studying the site and defining the architectural characteristics of the Roman town of Hadrianopolis. Between the 1970s and ‘80s the settlement, already known through ancient sources (Iab. Petut. VII, 3), was subject to investigations that focused on the study of the theatre. Recent investigations have shown that the Roman town grew above a previous settlement, probably of some importance, characterized by monumental public buildings. Only from the Roman period the settlement started to acquire proto-urban features. Its monumental form became evident in the early Imperial period with the construction of a small temple in opus quadratum, a circular structure which is now under the theatre and a waterway in the area occupied later by the thermal building. The latter, still visible near the limits of the area of the excavations, has a rectangular plan and was paved with large limestone slabs; the entrance consisted of two steps leading to a colonnaded facade.

It is not possible to know what role the settlement had in the territorial organization of the region in this period. Its strategic position within the road network system suggests that the village played a predominant role in the surrounding territory, perhaps with specific social and economic functions. The latest investigations on the surroundings yielded interesting data concerning the model of settlement in this region: it is probable that in the 4th century BC, Hellenistic settlements, often fortified, concentrated on hill tops and high areas, their economy being based on sheep breeding and, to some extent, on other activities related to the valley’s role as a communication route, such as agriculture and trade.

The main phase of the settlement, which saw the construction of the theatre and its adjacent buildings, can be dated to the period of Emperor Hadrian who was responsible for the promotion and refurbishment of the city. In this period, Hadrianopolis, main town and administrative centre
for the Roman nobilitas of Drino Valley and at the
whole of Epirus, was equipped with buildings
that were intended to provide an urban lifestyle,
starting with the theatre and the bath house. The
theatre is supported by an artificial structure com-
posed of an external circular wall conserved at a
high that ranges between 4 and 18 m, while the
cavea measures 56 m in diameter. The con-
struction material consists of stones and concrete.
The construction of the cavea above a retaining
structure rather than on the hillside, and the
direct connection between the cavea and the
stage are indicative of the Roman theatre build-
ing tradition. On the other hand, the plan of
the orchestra and of the cavea, which is larger than
a semi-circle, and the dimensions and shape of
the stage building - narrow and almost dis-
tolved from the cavea - find parallels in theatres
of the Greek-Hellenistic tradition. During the 4th
century AD the theatre was restored, rearranged
and transformed for venatioes and, perhaps,
gladiatorial combats. The bath house was built
probably in an area previously occupied by a
building of the same functions.

The phase of the building that can be presently
observed is the one that in the 3rd century AD
caused the resting of the previous Hadrianic
complex. Around a large courtyard accessed
by a monumental entrance, there are several
rooms, including the warm areas (calidorium and
tepidarium with the praefurnia next to it) still in
a good state of conservation and recently re-
stored. The archaeological investigations assisted
by geophysical surveys have revealed that
the settlement extended over a rectangular area
of 300 350 m E-W by 400 m N-S. In the urban
grid pattern with streets crossing each other at
right angles, the theatre and the bath house occu-
pied a position slightly offset to the south. More-
ever, between the two buildings, north the former
and west of the latter, we can assume the pres-
ence of an open area that perhaps functioned
as the forum. Remote sensing has further located
large peristyle houses organised around internal
courtyards in the central plots of the town. These
were probably accessible through vestibules and
provided with large spaces for the storage of
foodstuffs.

A necropolis, today at risk due to the expa-
sion of the village of Sofratika, extends over a
significant area beyond the urban limits. Already
investigated by Dr. Budina, its main phase of
use appears to date to the 2nd and 3rd centu-
ries AD. Subsequent excavations brought to light
six single inhumation graves, consisting of simple
stone lined, cist burials, covered with gabled lids;
also a funerary monument in the shape of a little
temple which contained two burials was found.

The great quantity of pottery and other finds, and
their quality show the significant commercial ac-
tivity that took place at Hadrianopolis. It appears
that between the 2nd-3rd and the 4th century
AD Hadrianopolis was well integrated in the
Mediterranean trade and played an important role
thanks to its geographic location along a
secondary branch of the Via Egnatia that led from Apollonia
to Nikopolis.

Noteworthy is the presence of several Roman
Relief Bowls from Corinth, African Red Slip Ware
and amphorae, imported and locally produced
glass, and bronze and marble artifacts. After a
period of crisis that lasted at least until the end of the 5th century AD, the urban centre re-emerged in the Justinian period when for a short period of time it was known as Justianopolis. In this phase, a worship structure, of which remain few architectural elements, was built within the theatre which had now lost its original function; the bathhouse was re-arranged into and converted into houses and shops; the small ancient temple built in opus quadratum was demolished and its remains incorporated into an articulate complex of buildings. Thus, the recent archaeological investigations suggest a residential rather than a cultural function (as previously proposed) of this area. This new phase was short-lived, however; already in the 6th century AD the signs of abandonment are evident and the city moved towards progressive ruination until the wind covered the ruins in the area with more than two meters of silt.

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Fragment of inscription, which mentions a procurator, No. 11D/11.342.44, l. 8.3 cm, w. 9 cm, AlA Gjirokastër
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Funerary monument

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Opus quadratum building of the Trojan period.

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Warm rooms of the Bath-house, from South-East
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Marble bowl, No. HD'10.2379.297, h. 14 cm, d. 28 cm, 2nd–3rd century AD; AloA Gjirokastër

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Cult related object, lead, No. HD'09.2143.199, l. 6.2 cm, w. 1.6 cm, 2nd–3rd century AD; AloA Gjirokastër

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Glass balsamarium from the necropolis, No. 10222, h. 12 cm, d. 4 cm, 2nd–3rd century AD; AloA Gjirokastër