

### 03. Butrint– Albania



Butrint is situated in the south-western part of Albania, occupying the small Ksamili peninsula, between the Straits of Corfu and Lake Butrint. A tectonic lagoon of 1,600 ha, Butrint Lake is surrounded by forested hills, mountains and saltwater, as well as freshwater marshes. Butrint hosts a high proportion of the biodiversity of the country and the largest numbers of amphibians and reptiles ever recorded in an Albanian site. The site was first occupied in the late Bronze Age and, due to its strategic position, it was a prominent port on the Adriatic seaway. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> Macedonian War in 167 BC, the city fell into the hands of the Romans who reclaimed some land and divided it among the veterans of Caesar's army. After three centuries of decline, a new era of prosperity began with the rise of Constantinople. In 1084 AD, the Venetians conquered Butrint. Subsequently, it was occupied by overlords, the Angevins, the Byzantine forces, the Venetians and finally the Ottomans until 1912, when Albania became an independent state. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Butrint had already declined to a small fishing village round the Venetian castle.

Butrint was brought to light in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by excavations prompted by Mussolini, which revealed remnants of all the civilisations that marked the site. Among them lie the Greek theatre (3-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), two temples and richly decorated gates, Roman Baths, the Temple of Minerva, the Nymphaeum, the Diaporit villa, the Triconch palace, the Byzantine Baptistery and Basilica, the Venetian Triangular fortress (16<sup>th</sup> century) and the Turkish castle (19<sup>th</sup> century). The Greek theatre is still in use, hosting classical and folklore music concerts, as well as theatre plays. In 1994, the excavations were undertaken by the Albanian Institute of Archaeology and International Water Association (working under the aegis of the Butrint Foundation). Some reservations have been expressed though, regarding the potential effect of the continuous large-scale excavations on such a fragile environment.

Butrint underwent dramatic changes in the 1950s when marshland reclamation started out. The loss of wetlands and the alteration of the physical-chemical parameters of the lake resulted in the degradation of habitats and in the extinction of certain species. Overgrazing, illegal practices and uncontrolled development were noted accompanying the collapse of the Communist regime in 1991.

The enlargement of the World Heritage Site and the creation of the Butrint National Park (1999-2000) have greatly assisted in the re-establishment of institutional control over the site and several projects have been launched recently. The site is frequently visited by schools and numerous tourists, while the wider area is under tourist development. During 2006, for example, the number of visitors increased by 30% over the previous years.

On the cultural side, conservation work was carried out in 2006 in various areas of the site, notably in the Nymphaeum, the Roman Villa, the Basilica and the Baths at Diaporit. Also, for the seventh consecutive year, the drama festival 'Butrint 2000' was organised in the recently restored Theatre of Butrint.