

The Roman colonies of south Illyria: A review

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The Roman colonies in southern Illyria were founded by Julius Caesar and developed by Augustus. The colonies belong to a relatively brief period of time spanning the late republican and early empire periods that witnessed the civil wars, the Triumvirate and the birth of the Principate. Founded in strategic geographical locations along the Adriatic seacoast or the adjacent hinterland, these colonies became pivotal points articulating the influence of Rome within Illyria, Greece, Macedonia and Asia Minor. Continuing imperial support permitted these foundations to flourish while, as often as not, indigenous cities suffered.

In Albania, the locations of Roman colonies conform closely to road networks – including the trans-Balkan Via Egnatia (Fasolo 2003) – to fertile regions and to serviceable harbours. The latter, in particular, are rare along the Albanian coastline, but were necessary for Rome's economic and military expansion. Consequently, the establishment of colonies in Dyrrachium, Scodra, Byllis and Buthrotum was part of a well-planned scheme that served not only the immediate need of land for veterans, but also facilitated Roman expansion and control.

The policy of the Roman Empire was to concentrate on the new colonial centres which would act as catalysts for regional development (Alcock 1993: 93–115) and stimulate change in the economic, political and social life of the existing population. The creation of regional administrative cities permitted closer control of a territory and its people (Lepelley 1993: 13–23). The colonies were also provided with huge rural territories which were typically restructured to conform to Roman practice. Rural, rather than urban, reorganization is one of the main foci of this article, a topic which until now has been scarcely studied in Albania.

The foundation of the colonies

The colony of Buthrotum was decreed in 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar. Apparently, this decision was not welcomed by the inhabitants of the city, especially not by Italian entrepreneurs present in the region, and the colonists were expelled. These events were described by Titus Pomponius Atticus, who had a home near Butrint, to Cicero (Ad Atticus XV: 29.4; XVI: 1; XVI: 4), but his information was clearly fragmentary and essentially based on rumours circulating in Rome (Deniaux 1993: 366). The colony was finally established at a later date by Augustus, subsequent to the battle of Actium.

Two coins found in Buthrotum testify to the early colonial history of the city. One coin reads C(olonia) I(ulia) BVT(hrotum), and the other C(olonia) A(ugusta) BVT(hrotum) (Pollo 1988: 164–165; 1993: 257–261). These are the principal sources for the foundation of the ‘two’ colonies. The colonial foundation of Buthrotum ended the prosperous koinon of the Prasaiboi, as shown by the many Hellenistic inscriptions, mostly manumissions, from the so-called ‘Tower of Inscriptions’ and the city’s theatre (Budina and Bozhori 1966: 143–191; Cabanes 1972: 105–209).

The most important monument of late republican/early colonial Buthrotum is the aqueduct: at least 3 km long, it comprised (at least) 65 arches and was probably supplied by a spring located at Xarë (Budina 1967: 145–149; Çondi 2000: 211–222). The principal buildings constructed by the colonists were probably situated near the theatre, which may have been rebuilt at this time (Gilkes 2003). The public centre of the city was almost certainly gaining a new shape, judging from the construction of a peristyle house immediately east of the theatre (Čeka 2002: 51). This remodelling of the public centre was accompanied by display of statues of Augustus, Agrippa and Livia, directly linking the colony to its imperial founders. In addition, an inscription dedicated to Minerva shows that Roman cults were now honoured in the city.

Dyrrachium had had close connections with Rome since the first Roman-Illyrian war and grew to become regionally dominant. Its situation as the foremost harbour of the region and the origin of the Via Egnatia were the major reasons for siting a colony here. This was carried out first during 42–41 B.C. by Mark Antony (Grant 1946: 276) and secondly by Augustus after Actium and named Colonia Iulia Augusta Dyrrachinorum.

Construction of the first city wall is generally attributed to this era (Gutteridge and Hoti 2003: 378) though precious little survives to help us reconstruct the city’s urban shape. The high water table, significant depth of deposits and unbridled modern development have made large-scale archaeological investigations extremely difficult. However, a great number of inscriptions have been found in the city. One of the most important records the building and repair of the city aqueduct (Adami 1950: 128), whilst another documents the building of the library (Miraj 1991: 253). Such inscriptions indicate that the city prospered during the reign of Hadrian both under the benefaction of the emperor and investment from the local Romanized elite.

Byllis, unlike most of the colonial foundations, was established in the interior. Nevertheless, its strategic position dominating the Vjosë river valley, a major routeway inland from Vlorë, linked it closely to the coastal colonies. Two reasons may explain the designation of a colony here: its proximity to fertile lands and its political history as an ally of Caesar during the civil wars. In Byllis, as in Dyrrachium, inscriptions are the primary source of information regarding construction of urban monuments (Ceka 1987: 49–121). Most record the building of temples, baths and altars with dedications to emperors. One reveals the reconstruction of the Hellenistic fortification by Augustus, probably to conserve the wall as a symbol of monumentality and prestige.

Scodra, situated north of Dyrrachium and once the seat of king Genthius, became a colony during the middle of the 1st century A.D. Scodra, together with neighbouring Lissus - a municipium - and the colony of Doclea further north, became one of the pre-eminent cities in the region. Unfortunately, little is known about the colony, though inscriptions of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. do offer some information (Kamsi 1973: 71–78). Monuments known thus far from the colonial period are a Roman villa dating from the 2nd century A.D. (Tafilica 1990: 263–264) and a temple dedicated to Neptune situated close to the river Drin (Ceka 2000: 180).

The colonies and their rural territory

A fundamental aspect of colonization was the organisation of agrarian territory and veterans invariably became the first farmers of newly opened land. Caesar, for example, not only gave his soldiers public lands, but also confiscated and awarded them private property. This was the case in Buthrotum where confiscation was justified by the city's non-payment of tax. T. Pomponius Atticus, senator and affluent local landowner, attempted to pay the tax himself in order to prevent the establishment of the colony. By contrast, colonists at Byllis and Scodra were probably established only on public lands (*ager publicus*), without need to expropriate private property.

Cities in southern Illyria were few: apart from the four colonies, the only other major settlements were Apollonia, Amantia, Hadrianopolis, Lissus and Phonicë. Most of the population, we may conclude, was living in the countryside. Ceka has identified an interesting shift from the uplands into the plains around the cities, as well as along the main roads, as in the case of Scampis (Ceka 1998: 54–55).

The greatest concentration of rural sites in south Illyria is around the city of Dyrrachium, in the area occupied by the parthinii. Dyrrachium was the most developed city of the region and the gateway to the Via Egnatia. It was also the colony with the most extensive rural territory (Wilkes 1996: 574). In addition, the possession of *ius Italicum* by the colony exempted the population from taxes. These rights, the city's economic prosperity and a large rural hinterland facilitated the creation of smaller outlying centres, possibly prosperous villa estates, such as Kryeluz (Myrto 1982: 18–19), Shkallnur (Tartari 1975: 137), Shijak (Praschniker

and Schober 2003: 46) and Kryemëdhënj (Hoti 1977: 327–328). Further information on these places within the orbit of Dyrrachium comes from Roman cemeteries at Golem, Kavajë, Shtodhër, Harizaj, Luz i Vogël, Gosë, Rrogozhinë and Kryevëdh. These merit further study for the information they might reveal about the colony's relations with its rural dependencies.

The area around Buthrotum also contained a significant rural population. The largest concentration of villas presently known in Albania can be found here. Villas at Dobër and Malathre represent a particular model of villa: in each case small Hellenistic farms were transformed into Roman villa rusticae (Çondi 1984: 131–152, 266–267). Roman villas are also recorded at Çukë and Diaporit. All these villas had a Hellenistic phase, but in the Roman period they were enlarged with more storage areas and, in the case of Diaporit, elaborate baths, mosaic pavements and other facilities on the Italian model.

By contrast, the rural area around the colony of Scodra seems to have been strikingly poor, although a dearth of field surveys and excavations makes it impossible to visualize the colony and its territory in any meaningful way. However, at the nearby municipium of Lissus, judging from sporadic finds around the city, it seems that the city started to expand beyond its walls during the 1st century A.D. This extra-mural development apparently lasted until the 3rd century (Zheku 1988: 74).

At present, total data regarding intensification of agriculture in early imperial times is inadequate. For example, it is entirely uncertain whether villas in the countryside were maintained by indigenous families or were taken by colonists or Italian negotiatores. It is to be hoped that publication of the extensive Butrint Foundation excavations at Diaporit, near Buthrotum, may provide the first detailed answers to such questions.

Colonial territory and the hierarchy of space

Roman colonization created a new hierarchy of territories: colonial territory was transformed into a platform for Roman domination and expansion (Gabba 2003: 23). A relationship between hierarchy and space has been noted in colonies in Achaia, but this situation was always variable (Rizakis 1997: 19), being dependent upon factors such as imperial plans or economic priorities. The clearest example in Albania comes from the colony of Buthrotum. Here, the colony adapted the existing Hellenistic townscape and only expanded beyond it onto the nearby Vrina Plain at the end of the 1st century A.D. The same phenomenon occurred at Phoinicë at much the same time. To judge from these examples, the process of reorganizing land did not happen immediately (cf. Giorgi 2004: 193; this volume), and the old sectors of both cities continued to be significant as they contained many public monuments.

Roman colonization was accompanied by territorial reorganization through centuriation. At present, examples of centuriation in Albania have been identified at Buthrotum (Butrint Foundation 2003, 16), Phoinicë (De Maria, Giorgi 2002: 107) and Hadrianopolis (Giorgi 2002: 131), while in Byllis it is possible that the

previous division per strigas was preserved.

Extension of a city's territory also permitted the local elite to participate and consolidate their wealth, subscribing to the norms of Roman imperial society. Indeed, we can conclude from epigraphic data that part of the local population started taking Roman names and attained privileged positions in the new cities. A process of integration between the indigenous and in-coming social groups occurred apparently to the advantage of both.

Conclusions

The establishment of colonies in the area of modern Albania did not lead to an immediate intensification of urbanism. Nevertheless, the Romans instigated an inexorable transformation of Illyrian society. Cities were undoubtedly enlarged, a process in which the leading classes played an axiomatic part. Roman presence in the colonies brought a new system of hierarchy, encouraging interdependence between cities and weakening the former natural borders between them; improved road communications further helped connect cities.

Colonies served as a model for a higher standard of life based upon practical and utilitarian innovations such as aqueducts, theatres, and public and private baths. The colonies helped to create an open and more dynamic economy and alongside this played a significant part in the organisation of land. Finally, Roman culture was promoted in these centres leading to an atmosphere of acculturation that extended into the countryside. However, as this short review of Roman colonies in southern Illyria has shown, there is still much to do to be able to comprehend the full extent of Roman impact upon contemporary landscape and rural society.