

A sense of place



It was on 1 September 1997 that I accompanied the Director of the Butrint Foundation and the British Ambassador to Albania to meet the country's newly elected Prime Minister, Fatos Nano. Nano had won a handsome majority following a period of civil unrest created by pyramid scheme speculation. The Prime Minister greeted us, and my colleague pitched the plan for an archaeological park at Butrint, ancient Buthrotum.

Our foundation had a model in mind, taken from innovative Italian sites. We assumed that Nano would listen and push back against the idea of transforming his country's premier Graeco-Roman site into another institutional entity. After four years of working in post-Communist Albania, it was clear that change in cultural sectors was not easy.

The Prime Minister listened and nodded and said 'Good'. How should we proceed? He was laconic, even gnomic. Then, to our astonishment, he turned to the British Ambassador and offered his condolences for the death of Princess Diana. For the following 15 minutes, scarcely taking a breath, he held forth on her, as though he knew her well. On that September day I doubt that as many as 10 visitors came to Butrint.

Today, 20 years after this meeting with Prime Minister Nano, much has changed. When I visited Butrint last August approximately 3000 to 5000 tourists were ambling around the site. Now, it is Albania's premier destination and, in the cultural heritage law before the new Albanian parliament, it is about to take a new direction, which it claims will be every bit as revolutionary as was taken in Nano's office in 1997.

This is placemaking in archaeology: the practice of either creating or lending a place, ancient or modern, an identity that, with strategic management of the conservation and presentation, attracts visitors whose support helps sustain it, ideally to international standards. Archaeologists (and architects) over the last century have become aware of their role in making places.

Archaeologists discover, excavate selectively and transform the ruins of the past, lending them an identity, and, above all, giving them a

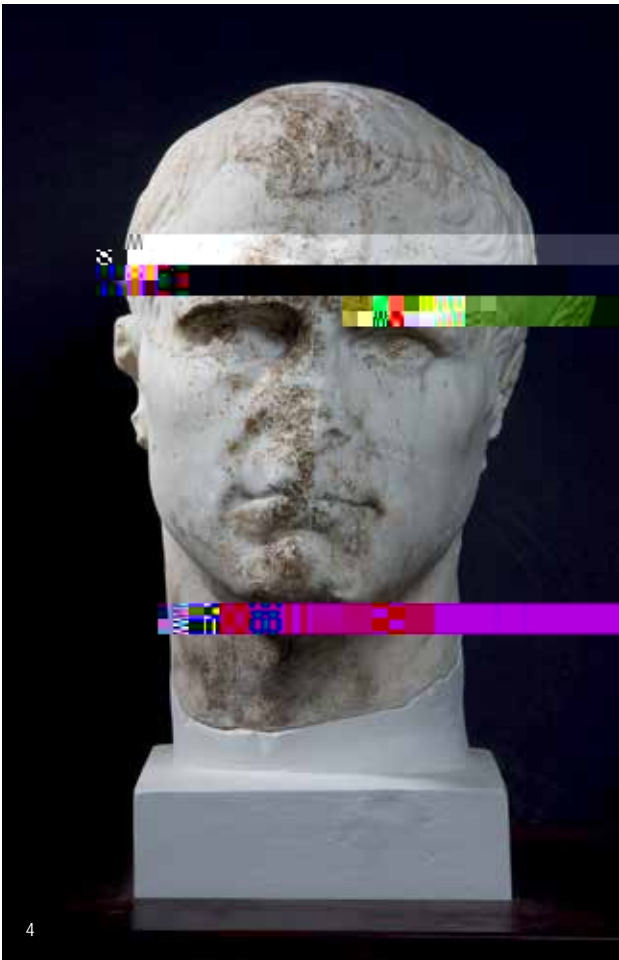
contemporary context, meaning or branding. Think only of the role of Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90) in making Mycenae, or the gargantuan excavations of Giacomo Boni (1859–1925) in the Roman Forum to help shape the new capital of a united Italy. Placemaking is not new, although the concept is borrowed from late 20th-century postmodern philosophy.

The French philosopher, Marc Augé defines a place as 'an invention: it has been discovered by those who claim it as their own'. Foundation narratives, he argues, 'bring the spirits of the place together with the first inhabitants in the common adventure of the group. A place is relational, historical and concerned with identity, whereas a non-place is a space which cannot be defined by these criteria'.

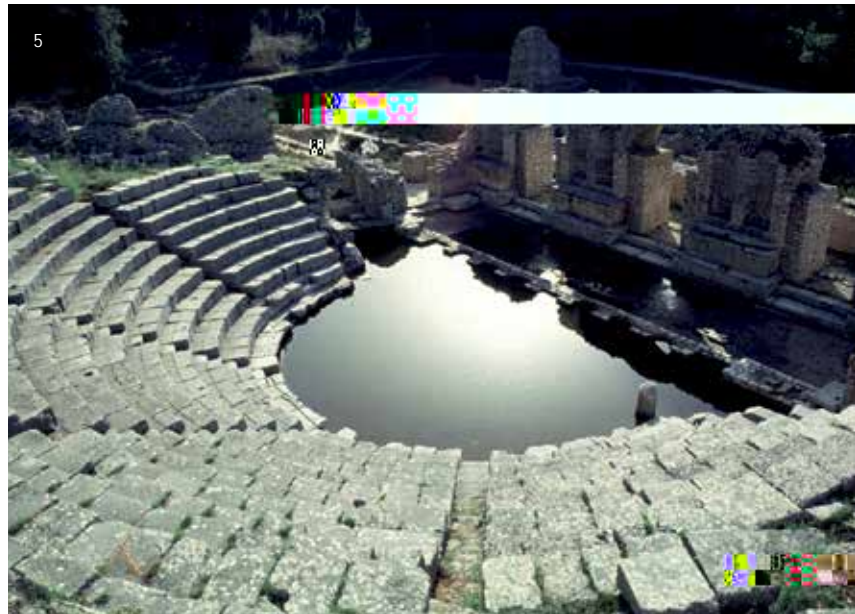
Places are given further value by complex periodic events. These are usually removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Temple cults and, later, the Church, commonly legitimised cultural activities at places.

Supermodernity, on the other hand, produces 'non-place' that, according to Augé, are 'spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which do not integrate the earlier places' (which are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to 'a circumscribed and specific position'). Airports, shopping malls, cinema complexes, hospitals and hotel resorts are fundamentally non-places (although there is a new effort to market them as places). In the concrete reality of today's world, places and non-places are intertwined.

Place and non-place are polarities, together 'the scrambled game of identity and relations that is ceaseless'. Augé is not alone in this. The



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rise to nearly 1000 metres, effectively creating a basin around the ancient city and lake.

The walled city covers an area of about 16 hectares, but surveys on the eastern side of the channel show that in antiquity Butrint covered as much as 25 hectares. The walled city comprises two parts: the acropolis and the lower city. Amongst the urban monuments is a Hellenistic theatre (5), a Roman forum, Roman town houses, a ne cathedral, an exceptional baptistery and a castle, all dotted within thick woodland. The most obvious monument outside the city walls, on the opposite side of the channel, is the well-preserved Triangular Castle, which after 1572 became the nucleus of the early modern settlement. Few places match a range of monuments and natural setting so well.

Butrint is eternal. It owes a priceless debt to Virgil who in his epic poem, Aeneid, had his exiled hero from Troy, Aeneas, pause here on the way to found Rome. At a stroke Butrint belonged to a Mediterranean foundation myth. Virgil's choice of Butrint – 'a Troy in miniature' – was no accident. A member of Augustus's new imperial

4. A bust of Agrippa (63–12 BC), Octavian's general, found during the excavations of the theatre in Butrint.

5. A view of the Hellenistic and Roman theatre today.

6. Archaeologists record the acropolis fortifications at Butrint in 2006.



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court in Rome, Virgil was paying personal tribute to the emperor's right-hand man, Agrippa (4), whose first wife, Caecilia Attica, came from Butrint. With such serendipity the port was forever sealed in aspic, at least until our era. Instinctively, the post-war Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha, appreciated this to attract hard currency from controlled tourism, even though he eschewed

Virgil's connection with Butrint in favour of his own historical myths.

For most visitors today Butrint conjures up a different experience. It is the Other, a Mediterranean paradise, a place in a timeless landscape. In a postmodern age it is a shrine to historicism within an exceptional park environment. It is not Disneyesque. Quite the contrary, it is a journey through a

natural oasis that challenges the homogenisation (non-places) of social space and experience of modern capitalism.

For ve years this threat menaced the Virgil-Ugolini legacy. The Butrint Foundation was created by Lord Rothschild and Lord Sainsbury (9) in 1993 to protect and preserve Butrint and that same year I joined them. Our simple aim, perhaps presumptuous, was to sustain the genius loci – spirit of place, for future visitors, gener