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FORTIFIED SETTLEMENTS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

DEFENDED COMMUNITIES OF THE 8TH–10TH CENTURIES

Edited by

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Front cover: Clockwise from left: Gars-Thunau *(aerial photo: © Aerial Photography Archive, Department of Prehistoric and Medieval Archaeology, University of Vienna; digital reconstruction: Michael Lisner)*; Segesta *(Gianni Gervasi)*; Bullcroft, Wallingford *(Neil Christie)*; Cahergal cashel, Co. Kerry *(Michelle Comber)*.

Contents

PART III: WESTERN EUROPE

PART IV: MEDITERRANEAN AND ADRIATIC EUROPE

A Window on an Uncertain World: Butrint and the Fortified Sites of Epirus in the 7th–9th Centuries AD

William Bowden

Introduction: The Problem of the Early Middle Ages in the Balkans

Although in many other parts of Europe the so-called 'Dark Ages' have become increasingly illuminated in recent years, the early medieval history of much of the southern Balkans has remained opaque. Textual sources are limited and archaeological evidence remains hard to identify and chronologically imprecise. Dating of most of the sites and structures that have been placed in the 7th to early 9th centuries has traditionally relied on a combination of inference and wishful thinking in which signs of human activity are linked to events attested (sometimes obliquely) in documentary evidence. Alternatively, evidence of late Roman and later medieval activity on a given site is used to infer otherwise invisible occupation in the intervening period. In fact it is very rare that unequivocal archaeological evidence is found relating to this problematic period. This could imply several possible explanations:

1. there were in fact very few people living in the area
2. the people who were living here possessed very limited material culture and are thus archaeologically hard to see
3. archaeologists have been looking in the wrong places for these people and sites
4. the methods employed by archaeologists have been inadequate for the detection of more ephemeral occupation.

Such issues are of course well-trodden ground for any archaeologist who has worked on the late Roman towns of the region that shrunk to vanishing point in the Early Middle Ages and I do not intend to revisit these in any

detail. I would contend, however, that all these cited factors have played a role in the apparently intractable problem of *la grande brèche* in late antique Greece and some of its neighbours.

In this paper I will examine this problem in relation to the late Roman province of *Epirus Vetus* (which covers parts of present-day north-west Greece and southern Albania). Here, the debate around this period has primarily focused on two categories of site: churches and the fortified hilltops that sometimes had the added strategic advantage of (pre-)existing circuits of fortifications dating broadly to the Hellenistic period. Since I have discussed issues of dating churches to this period elsewhere (Bowden 2009), I will not cover this topic in detail again. Instead I shall examine the problem of the hilltop sites in relation to some key data from Butrint in southern Albania that has emerged in the last decade, before concluding with some thoughts on the types of social structures that may be represented by this archaeology. Although the remit of this volume is the 8th–10th centuries, by necessity much of my coverage pertains to the 7th century as this is the point at which the majority of our key dating evidence dwindles to invisibility. However, it can also be argued that a better understanding of the situation in the 7th century is essential if we are to hypothesise on the nature of settlement in the subsequent period.

Unreliable Narratives: Textual Evidence and Historiographies of Epirus

Our fragmentary textual evidence paints a bleak picture of life in 7th-century Epirus, which the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire was seemingly unable to defend from attack by groups which are often, although not exclusively,

defined as Sclavenes. In AD 586/7, according to the much debated Chronicle of Monemvasia and Arethas of Caesarea (writing in the 10th century), these attacks caused the native population to flee to the Ionian islands and southern Italy (Charanis 1950, 148; Dujčev 1976, 86–88; Chrysos 1981, 71). This forced migration and subsequent refugee status of sections of the population seems to be a feature of the period. For example, in AD 591, Pope Gregory the Great urged the bishops of Illyricum to provide refuge for their peers who had been driven out of their sees until such time as they could return (*Epistles* I, 43; Chrysos 1981, 72).

By 604 the only bishop remaining on the mainland of *Epirus Vetus* was that of the provincial capital Nikopolis. Four other bishops were guests of a fifth, Bishop Alkison of Kerkyra. Alkison's guests were soon causing trouble, carving out independent sees for themselves on Kerkyra, forcing Pope Gregory to intercede on behalf of Alkison (*Epistles* XIV, 7; XIV, 13; see Chrysos 1981, 74). Further Slavic attacks of 614–616 were recorded in the *Miracles of St Demetrius*, which suggested that 'wherever they wrought their havoc, they left more of the cities and the countryside uninhabitable' (Lemerle 1979–1981, 175; Chrysos 1981, 78; Soustal and Koder 1981, 51).

Although considering some of the more strident testimonies of our own times in relation to migration might cause us to question the veracity of our limited sources for the 7th century, those sources do paint a fairly consistent picture of instability and forced migration on the part of the existing population. The evidence of place-names could also suggest significant inward migration into the Epirus in this period: of around 450 toponyms in Epirus and the Ionian islands, some 180 (mainly inland) are of Slavic origin, although the link between place-names and the ethnicity of a region's inhabitants is notoriously problematic and a number may well be of later origin (Osswald 2007). It is also often argued that the region of *Vagenetia*/*Bagenetia* (whose name survives into the Turkish period) on the coast of Epirus reflected the area controlled by the Baiunetai, a Slav tribe whose presence in Epirus is attested in the Miracles of St Demetrius (Soustal and Koder 1981, 119–120).

The Slav presence in Epirus remains hotly contested in nationalist rhetoric in both Greece and Albania, with the relative paucity of clear evidence allowing the protagonists in such debates to make any argument that suits their purpose (Curta 2011, 1–8). At its heart this debate rests on a simplistic view of ethnic identity predicated on a binary division of the population into 'Greek' or 'Slav', reflecting a 'primordial' view of ethnicity, in which ethnic identity as fixed and immutable, based on factors such as genetic or geographical origins or allegiances and language (see Jones 1997, 65). This approach to ethnicity is now widely regarded as unsatisfactory, with many scholars preferring to view ethnic identity as a highly flexible situational construct. This has had little effect, however, on the debate surrounding early medieval Greece or Albania, which sees an incoming Slav population of uncertain size existing as 'islands in a solid population of Greeks' (Vokotopoulou 1992, 4) before being ultimately 'assimilated' into the Greek population (*e.g.* Osswald 2007, 129, 144).

The idea of 'assimilation' (and the related 'Christianisation') is obviously problematic, in that 'assimilation' denies active agency on the part of the incomers who are rendered passive recipients of a dominant Greek language and culture. In this it resembles the concept of 'Romanisation', which has been largely discredited as a model in recent years due to its simple binary opposition between the categories of 'Roman' and 'native' and the way in which it is unidirectional, with influence running only from colonisers to the colonised (see Mattingly 2002 and 2006, 15–16, 545 for references to the major literature). However, the Byzantine administrative structure that was re-established in Epirus in the 9th century was very different to that of the late Roman Empire, based as it was around the settlement pattern that evolved in the intervening period, and should be seen as emerging from the circumstances of the 7th and 8th centuries discussed below. Any inwardly migrating population in the 7th century should be regarded as a key factor in these circumstances, rather than as an element that simply melted away in the face of a culturally dominant Greek society.

The paucity of textual evidence for the later 7th, 8th and early 9th centuries in Epirus is in part due to the fact that the area had in practice a very tenuous connection with the Byzantine administration across this period. This is also reflected in the almost complete absence of coins later than the first decades of the reign of Heraclius, a lacuna that lasted until the early 9th century (see Veikou 2012a, 251–255), suggesting that Epirus had fallen from the orbit of monetary circulation (and hence the Byzantine military) – a point discussed further below. This contrasts with the situation in Corinth and Athens (and, to a lesser extent, sites in the Peloponnese) where numismatic evidence attests to continued, if episodic, coin supply and arguably therefore a Byzantine military presence (Curta 2011, 111–113). Other evidence consists of the presence of Epirote sees in lists of bishops dating to the 8th century (Soustal and Koder 1981, 83) and seals relating to John, Archbishop of Nikopolis, dating to the 7th or 8th century (Chrysos 1997, 186–188), although to what extent this relates to activity at the sites themselves is unclear. Indeed, in the 10th century, the seat of both the *strategos* and the metropolitan of Nikopolis was at Naupaktos to the south, while the seal evidence of the 8th and 9th centuries indicates that the focus of Byzantine power in the region was the island of Kephallenia (Soustal and Koder 1981, 83–84; Veikou 2012a, 242–248).

Figure 17.1. Map of the late antique hilltops and islands of Epirus Vetus *(Image by author).*

The Hilltop Sites and Islands

It appears that a fundamental reorganisation of settlement took place in Epirus in the 7th century and possibly earlier, involving a shift towards more defensive sites on hilltops and islands (Bowden 2003a, 173–190; Veikou 2012a, 282–290; Veikou 2012b). This reflects a wider adoption of this type of site in the southern Balkans (see Hood 1970; Gregory 1981; 1982; 1992; Dunn 1994; 2004; Bintliff 2012; Veikou 2012b). Much of the discussion of these sites has interpreted them in the context of the refortification of Epirus under the emperor Justinian (527–565), described

by Procopius in Book IV of *The Buildings*; indeed, several of the sites can be plausibly identified with those described by Procopius. However, the extent to which the hilltop sites were part of a coherent defensive strategy under Justinian is highly debateable and it can be argued that *The Buildings* reflects an existing situation that Procopius attempted to co-opt into a narrative of imperial achievement demanded by the panegyric form (Bowden 2003a, 173–180; 2006). Nonetheless, whatever the reason behind it, there seems little doubt that these sites marked a significant change in the settlement patterns of Epirus.

The roles fulfilled by these sites in Epirus remain unclear, not least because the archaeological evidence is so poor. As with other examples of such sites in Greece, they often produce late antique ceramics and coins, evidence of churches, and construction of new fortifications or repair of pre-existing Hellenistic wall circuits. None have produced any dateable evidence relating to the second half of the 7th century or the 8th century, although some have yielded coins and other evidence relating to the 9th century or later. Some 33 probable hilltop and island sites can be identified within Epirus Vetus (Fig. 17.1 and Table 17.1), while most of the region's Roman towns show occupation into the 6th and, possibly, 7th centuries. Butrint and Nikopolis have clear evidence of 7th-century occupation and such can also be suggested for Phoenike and Onchesmos (Bowden 2000 and 2003). Other lowland sites with churches have been suggested to demonstrate 7th- to 9th-century phases, but the evidence remains very limited (Bowden 2009).

The hilltop sites and islands summarised in Table 17.1 demonstrate a wide variety of characteristics and there is no reason to view them as all sharing the same function. However, certain common features are worth considering. Noticeably, 16 of the 33 sites had been fortified in the pre-Roman period and often possessed substantial circuits in isodomic or polygonal masonry which were likely repaired or altered in Late Antiquity. Actual close dating of the rebuilding of these circuits has never been demonstrated archaeologically, however, and the evidence for late antique occupation is often very fragmentary or conjectural.

Nonetheless, a number of these sites were clearly used in the 6th century or later. Some of the best evidence comes from Kastritsa on the southern side of the lake of Ioannina (Fig. 17.2), where Hammond recorded the wall circuit as measuring around 2,625 m long and including numerous later reconstructions (1967, 67–69). Excavations within the site uncovered two buildings of Classical or Hellenistic date that had been re-occupied in Late Antiquity, with the exterior polygonal walls reconstructed using *spolia* and limestone rubble and internal partitions created using limestone rubble. One of these buildings contained two coin hoards of 86 and 237 coins respectively, composed of a range of bronze coinage of which the earliest was of Constantius Gallus (351–354) and the latest was a *follis* of Maurice dating to 582/3 (Douzougli 1994). Kastritsa has been suggested as a possible location for *Euroea*, described in some detail by Procopius (*Buildings* IV. i. 39–42). A further good example is that of Rizovouni (ancient *Vatiae*), where the rebuilt walls include brick levelling courses typical of late Roman fortifications laid directly onto the isodomic masonry of the earlier circuit (Fig. 17.3). The fort's interior features the remains of a probable late antique church, although no archaeological material has been recorded from the site (Bowden 2000; 2003, 180–185). The

present name of the locality (Lelova) is of Slavic origin (Soustal and Koder 1981, 193).

This reuse of earlier sites can be interpreted in different ways, none of which are mutually exclusive. Pre-existing fortifications presumably were attractive in that they provided an easily defended location at short notice. The circuits are usually large enough to contain people and their flocks or herds but the combination of natural terrain and artificial fortifications would make it possible for a relatively small number of people to defend them. In fact it appears that in some cases only part of the earlier defended area was enclosed, as at Kastri and Çuka e Ajtojt (Bowden 2003a, 180). The presence of earlier fortifications meant that new construction efforts could be confined to repairs, rebuilding and reinforcement of damaged/eroded or vulnerable areas. This perhaps has implications for our understanding of the human and financial resources available for such a project, although even in the case of limited repairs the investment should not be underestimated.

Re-establishing a presence on earlier sites may also have had a symbolic value. The use of pre-Roman and Roman monuments in the early medieval period is widely attested, indicating their importance as part of a symbolic vocabulary in which connections with the physical remains of a perhaps mythical past were used to articulate power and ownership in the present (Effros 2001). This behaviour has notable resonance in times of insecurity, when affirmations of a community's past become particularly important (Furedi 1992).

Whether these sites were refuges or permanent settlements in the 7th century and later is difficult to say in light of the paucity of excavated evidence, although there is no reason to suppose a single explanation across the different sites. Certainly some of the cities of Epirus remain occupied into the 7th century, albeit at a reduced scale. Few lowland rural sites have seen sufficient excavation to argue for persistence beyond the 6th century. Post-7th-century occupation has been suggested at structures that seem to post-date the church of H. Sophia (Mytikas), although the only dating evidence comprises two coins of the late 10th–11th centuries (Bowden 2000, 60–62; Veikou 2012a, 434–435). Some churches feature burials that post-date the abandonment of the building but dating evidence is absent.

The most fully excavated of these late antique sites is the tiny island of Kephalos in the Ambracian Gulf. Although covering barely 10 acres, the island shows intensive occupation in the 6th and early 7th century, including two basilicas (one with a baptistery) and several other structures of uncertain date (Barla 1965; 1966; 1967; 1968; 1970; Bowden 2000, 43–47; 2003, 186–189). Finds notably include 27 coins from the reign of Heraclius, with the latest identifiable example dating to 617/8. Ceramics include late ARS (an example of Hayes 91D was published by Barla) together with less closely datable sherds of LR1 and LR2

Table 17.1. Summary of evidence from hilltop sites and islands in Epirus.

Site name	Type of site	Evidence for 6th–7th century	Evidence for later activity	Fortifications
H. Aikateri	Promontory	Pottery	Later church	
Angelokastro	Coastal hill	Sculpture	Medieval castle (13th C. & later)	
Antigoneia	Promontory	5th–6th C. church		Hellenistic fortifications with later addition
Aphiona	Promontory	Settlement, graves & church	Graves and houses	Hellenistic fortification
Bregu I Melanit	Hilltop	Sculpture & ceramics. Possibly Justinianopolis described by Procopius	Later village adjacent	Hellenistic with later additions
Chimara	Promontory	Mentioned by Procopius	Discussed in sources from 11th C. onwards	Hellenistic
Çuka e Ajtojt	Hilltop	Ceramics		Hellenistic with probable late antique phase
H. Donatus	Hilltop	Fortification (described by Procopius)	Site mentioned in sources from 10th C. onwards	Limestone rubble above possible Hellenistic masonry
H. Eleni	Coastal ridge/ island	Ceramics	Post-medieval church	Polygonal masonry, with possible late additions
Kastos	Island	Traces of early church		
Kastri	Hilltop	Some Roman finds	Some later ceramics	Polygonal masonry with undated later additions
Kastritsa	Promontory	Buildings, ceramics & late 6th C. coin hoard		Hellenistic with probable late antique additions
Kephalos	Island	Extensive occupation, pottery, two basilicas & 7th C. coins	10th C. coins	
Konitsa	Promontory	Possible 6th C. or later fort recorded by Hammond		
Lachanokastron	Hilltop/ridge	Fortifications of uncertain date with nearby basilica	Mentioned in 15th C. texts	Late antique or (probably) medieval fortifications
Lagoudia	Island	Structural remains & 6th C. pottery		
Lekli	Promontory	Late antique pottery, structural remains (church?) with mosaic.	Byzantine & Venetian coins	Polygonal wall circuit with late antique or medieval extension.
Likouresi	Hilltop	Site of so-called Nekyomanteion. Late Roman pottery recorded.	Medieval–post-medieval monastery	Fortified Hellenistic farmstead?
Malçanit	Hilltop	Late antique(?) graves		Hellenistic circuit with some later addition.
Mauropulon	Promontory	Fortification	Mentioned in 15th C. sources	Mortared limestone rubble wall circuit
Ozia (Paxos)	Island	Two churches of uncertain date	Churches?	
Paleokaster	Roman fort	Late antique churches & ceramics		4th C. cohort fortress
Panaghia	Island	Possible late antique church		
Peratia	Coastal promontory	Possible late antique church	Venetian castle	
Përmet	Promontory	Fortification & late antique ceramics		Mortared limestone circuit with rectangular towers
Petrani	Promontory	Roman & late antique ceramics		Walls are reported but no longer visible

Table 17.1. Summary of evidence from hilltop sites and islands in Epirus. (Continued)

Site name	Type of site	Evidence for 6th–7th century	Evidence for later activity	Fortifications
Polistafilo	Promontory	Possible late antique church	Medieval & post-medieval village	
Qeparo	Hilltop	Buildings, fortifications & ceramics (?)	Late Byzantine (?) pottery	Hellenistic circuit with possible later addition
Rizovouni	Hilltop	Fortifications & late antique church	Later medieval (?) pottery & post-medieval church	Hellenistic wall circuit with late antique rebuilding
Sistrouni	Ridge	Fortifications (?) & nearby late antique church	Fortifications of unknown date & cistern	Hellenistic wall with extensive late antique or medieval rebuilding
H. Stephanos	Island	Late antique church	Possible medieval church	
Xirolophos	Ridge	Late antique pottery		
Ziminec	Hilltop	Possible fortification & nearby late antique settlement		Hellenistic wall with possible later additions
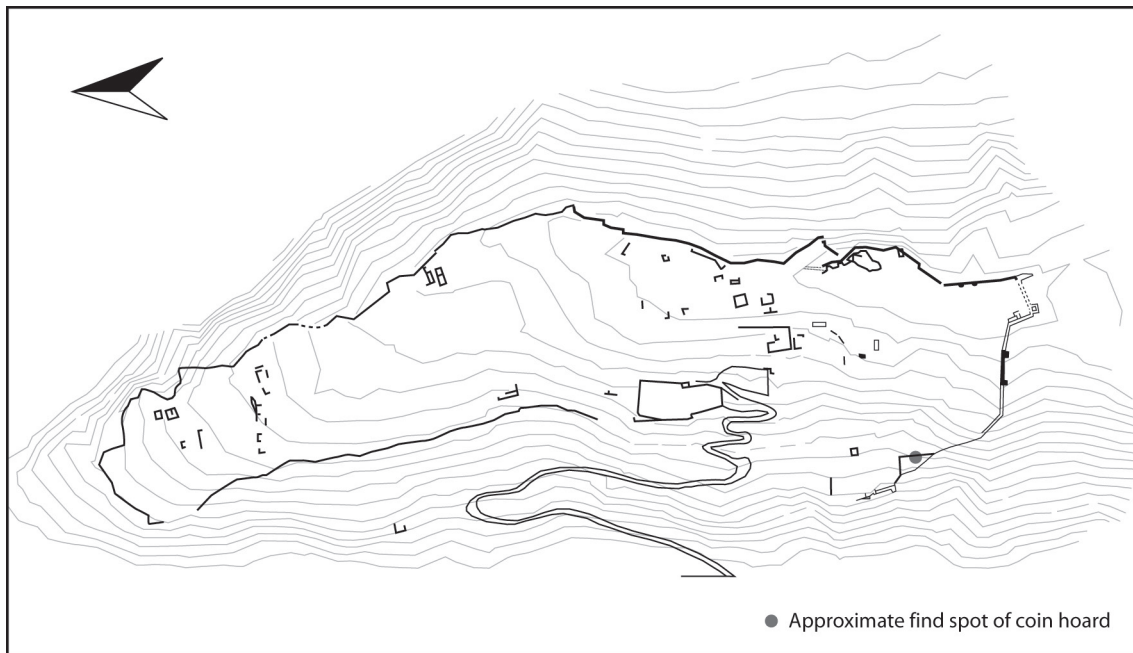
Figure 17.2. Kastritsa (After Douzougli 1994, fig no 1).

amphorae (Veikou 2012a, figs 183–184); numerous loom weights were also recovered. The mosaic from Basilica B bears a striking resemblance to the pavement of Basilica A at Nikopolis while a number of brick stamps from Kephalos Basilica A are also paralleled at Nikopolis (Sodini 1970, 723–724), suggesting that Kephalos was linked to the ecclesiastical and civil administration of the provincial capital.

Kephalos is intriguing in that it contains the vast majority of the published 7th-century coins from the province, although an unlisted sequence of coins apparently lasting into the 8th century was recorded by Vokotopoulos (1974) from his otherwise unpublished excavations of a series of 'huts' built against the interior of the late antique walls at Nikopolis. Even allowing for the limited and poor quality excavation elsewhere in the province this is a striking figure. Butrint, for example, which has seen very large-scale excavation, has only produced single coins of Phocas, Heraclius and Constans II and a further 7th-century follis, possibly of Heraclius or Constans II (Cesano 1932, 74; Bowden 2011, 317; Kamani 2013, 252). The obvious conclusion from this is that Kephalos (and by extension

Figure 17.3. Late antique masonry at Rizovouni (Image by author).

Nikopolis) remained within the Byzantine monetary economy of the early 7th century while Butrint and the rest of the province had fallen out of it. This could suggest a military presence at Nikopolis and Kephalos (Curta 2011, 97) and further underlines the exceptional nature of the site.

The absence of coins at other hilltop sites and islands also argues against a wider military presence at these, given the strong link between coin distribution and military activity attested by evidence in Achaea and the Peloponnese (Curta 2011, 85–89). If so, we might read (*contra* Procopius) these defended sites as localised initiatives rather than central imperial policy, although there is no reason to suppose that site functions or control would remain constant between the mid-6th and early 7th centuries.

A further five islands off the Epirote coast contain evidence of late antique occupation (Table 17.1), mainly based on the presence of possible churches. Those at Ozia on the island of Paxos are suggested to date to the 7th or 8th centuries, although this chronology is based heavily on limited stylistic analogy (Pallas 1977, 147–149; Bowden 2000, 89); accordingly, as with other churches in the region assigned to this period, a later date is equally possible (Bowden 2009). Paxos, as a waterless island, has

little to recommend it beyond its defensive properties and remoteness, although its inhospitable nature may also have been attractive to Christian ascetics.

For the remainder of the 7th century and through the 8th century, evidence from the hilltop sites and islands is largely absent, the major exception being the remote site of Aphiona on the north-west coast of Corfu (Bulle 1934; Bowden 2003a, 203–209; Curta 2011, 121–123). Here a precipitous coastal promontory extended out into the Ionian Sea; a narrow isthmus at the far end led to a further promontory protected by a series of pre-Roman fortifications. On the main area of the site a settlement was identified occupying an area of about 200 × 100 m, which the excavators suggested was largely occupied by buildings separated by narrow passages and streets. Four of these houses were identified, varying from 5.5–7.7 m in length and 3.5–5.5 m in width, with at least one house divided into two rooms. Tufa quern stones, which Curta (2011, 121) notes are also present at Isthmia, suggest trading connections with Italy; the pottery from the settlement is only recorded as 'Byzantine'. In addition, a series of over 50 graves were noted, of which 19 were recorded in detail with nine containing grave goods paralleled in 7th- to 8th-

century contexts elsewhere (notably the so-called Komani cemeteries in central Albania) (Bowden 2003b; 2015 with references). Grave goods include glass vessels, earrings, necklaces of glass beads, rings, pendants, large fibulae and buckles including a 'Corinth-type' buckle. Ceramics included small one-handled jugs that Curta (2011, 121) proposes are paralleled in a 7th-century cemetery at the church of St Dionysius the Areopagite in Athens. Both male and female skeletons (including children) are interred in the graves, which, like the Komani cemeteries, often contain multiple burials. Two possible churches were noted, one in association with a furnished burial.

The nature of the community at Aphiona is open to question. Curta (2011, 123) suggested that Aphiona, the Komani cemeteries and related sites elsewhere in Greece represent the presence of land troops stationed more or less permanently with their families; he points to similar interpretations of related cemeteries in Sicily and Sardinia and in Bulgaria, close to the current Bulgarian-Greek border. Certainly the cemetery assemblages in Corfu and Albania attest to supra-regional connections, although there are also significant differences between them, notably at Aphiona the presence of glass vessels (absent from the Albanian cemeteries) and the lack of the millefiori beads and crescent-shaped earrings that are common at Koman and Kruja. Weapons are also not present at Aphiona, whereas swords and spears are known from Koman and Kruja (although remain exceptional) and the most common (but not ubiquitous) weapons at the Albanian cemeteries are axes, daggers and arrowheads. There is certainly not a secure martial identity represented in the grave assemblages (Bowden 2015).

Perhaps the strongest argument against a military presence at Aphiona is the site's location, which has no obvious strategic value. The remote promontory location in the far north west of Corfu is more easily interpreted as that of a community conscious of their own security rather than as one performing a military role such as monitoring maritime traffic on the Corfu Strait. There are also indications of other occupation on the inhospitable western coast of Corfu, with further contemporary graves noted at Palaiokastritsa slightly to the south of Aphiona (Agallopoulou 1973). Potentially other cemeteries and settlement remain to be discovered on the more sheltered eastern side of Corfu, adjacent to the Corfu Strait, although given this area's intensive development for tourism in recent decades it seems likely that some trace of early medieval occupation would have come to light if such was widespread here.

Butrint

We can turn now to Butrint, which is the only site in the province that has provided stratified evidence dating to the 8th and early 9th centuries (Fig. 17.4). These data have

been published in detail elsewhere (Bowden and Hodges 2012; Greenslade 2013; Kamani 2013) and a summary will suffice here. When we started working at Butrint in 1994, one of the main aims of the project was to find out what happened to a port in the central Mediterranean in the late and post-Roman period. As noted above, the late antique urban centres of *Epirus Vetus* dwindle to vanishing point by the mid-7th century. Evidence for later activity at the former provincial capital of Nikopolis is very limited (summarised by Veikou 2012a, 482–484) but Butrint by the 10th century was re-emerging as a major centre (Hodges 2011; Bowden and Hodges 2012). However, despite extensive excavations, the period from the 7th until the 9th century proved elusive. Investigation of two large late antique monuments – the Triconch Palace and the Baptistery – as well as other, smaller interventions within and outside the city failed to locate any deposits dating to this period. When we published the first phase of the excavations in 2003, we suggested that occupation within the town was drastically curtailed in the 7th century and thus postulated the existence of a *kastron* on the acropolis (Hodges 2003). Subsequent investigation of this putative early medieval centre failed, however, to locate conclusive evidence of occupation in this period (Greenslade *et al*. 2013, 62).

Although a *kastron* on the acropolis now appears unlikely, excavation of two towers on the late Roman fortifications on the western side of the town have revealed occupation sequences that include a major episode of destruction dating to *c*. AD 800 (Bowden and Hodges 2012; Kamani 2013). The two towers were part of the late antique defences, another section of which has been dated to the first quarter of the 6th century (Bowden *et al*. 2011, 175–184). The western section of the defences was the most substantial as it defended the landward approach to Butrint. Finds immediately above the towers' construction levels date from the late 5th to the mid-6th century, suggesting that their construction was broadly contemporary with the dated phases elsewhere. There is no clear indication that occupation continued uninterrupted into the Middle Ages, although C14 dates on carbonised timbers indicate that some of the timbers of the towers were replaced between the mid-6th and mid-7th centuries, indicating maintenance works.

By the late 8th century these towers were reoccupied, seemingly as dwellings that retained the original late antique configuration of the towers. These dwellings were both subsequently destroyed in a catastrophic fire and their burnt contents revealed an extraordinary assemblage of objects, including several thousand fragments of glass, comprising around 100 glass vessels as well as window glass, waste glass and raw glass, intended for recycling and dating to the late 5th–8th centuries. The most common vessels (and the most complete ones) are stemmed wine glasses dating to the 8th century. Chemical analysis provided parallels with 8th- and 9th-century glass production in the
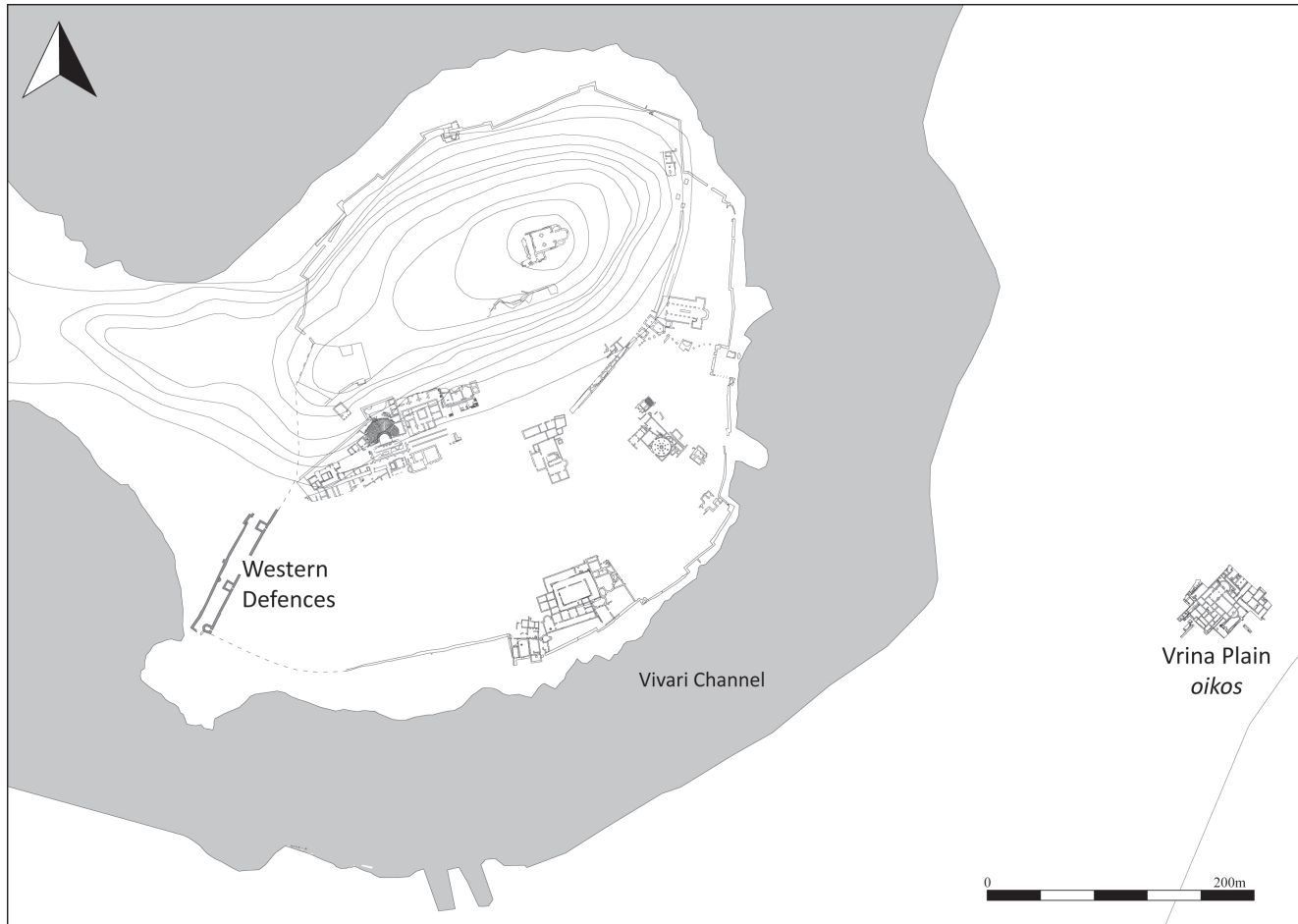
Figure 17.4. Locations of 7th- to 9th-century occupation at Butrint, at the Western Defences and on the Vrina Plain (Image by Butrint Foundation).

Middle East. Other smaller fragments of vessel and window glass are typical of 6th-century assemblages at Butrint and clearly show the value of cullet as a commodity. It is thought that the glass was being reworked locally (Jennings 2010; Jennings and Stark 2013). The ceramics included globular amphorae from various parts of the Mediterranean (the Crimea, Crete or southern Italy), chafing dishes, and unglazed white ware from Constantinople. In Tower 2, the amphorae were housed on the ground floor, while a different selection of pottery occurred on the first floor including a number of unusual three-spouted jugs (Vroom 2012).

The discoveries on the Western Defences tell us some interesting things about 8th-century Butrint and by extension about Epirus as a whole. First, they suggest that the *kastron* (if we can refer to it as such) was located in the Western Defences rather than on the acropolis, fitting in with our previous model in concept if not in location. It also tells us that material from this elusive period does indeed exist but is present in much smaller quantities than that of earlier periods. However, if this type of material had been present in the other major excavations at Butrint

(and at other excavated sites in the region), it would surely have been found.

The next identifiable phase at Butrint was on the Vrina Plain, an extramural area that had previous hosted a number of major Roman town houses, one of which was converted into a Christian basilica in the late 5th or early 6th century, with a large apsidal audience hall functioning as the narthex (Bowden and Hodges 2012; Greenslade 2013). The church was seemingly abandoned from the mid-6th century but the site saw renewed use in the mid-9th century. The basilica structure underwent some repairs and alterations including the blocking of the nave arcades and construction of a new altar. Post-holes were also cut through the flagstones of the audience hall/narthex after fires had been set to crack the slabs and it is clear that much of this complex had two stories. Other additions included a pottery kiln built in a room off the eastern aisle.

The site produced 49 Byzantine coins covering AD 820–950, the majority of which were *folles* of Leo VI (866–912); they were generally in good condition suggesting limited circulation. The ceramic assemblage was 50% composed

of wine amphorae from Otranto, with the remainder made up of local kitchen wares, with minimal finewares present. A number of graves were found: their C14 dates show that they were contemporary with this late occupation; one burial also contained a *follis* of Leo VI. Most strikingly, the site produced five lead seals, associated with Byzantine officials, including John, *strategos* of Sicily, Constantine, *strategos* of Dyrrachium, an unidentified *strategos*, a certain Kallonas connected to the imperial administration and Constantine, a eunuch courtier from Constantinople in charge of imperial banquets (Papadopoulou 2012a).

The assemblage as a whole suggests that the Vrina Plain residence was that of an archon, a regional administrator, possibly Theodore who is mentioned as archon of *Vagenetia* on an 8th- to 9th-century seal from Bulgaria (Vagenetia being the medieval name for this part of Epirus). It is intriguing, however, that this regional administrator chose not to locate himself within the relative security of the walled town of Butrint but in an undefended site on the Vrina Plain – surely a clear statement of power and perhaps an illustration of the changing circumstances by the mid-9th century. This site was seemingly abandoned *c*. AD 950, when large-scale activity seems to return to the walled town (Hodges 2011).

Conclusion: Power and Society in Epirus in the 7th–10th Centuries

The evidence from the hilltop sites and islands, such as it is, speaks of a fractured and insecure society from the late 6th century AD. Since none of these sites were obviously occupied during the Roman period, they clearly represent a major shift in priorities (even if they were only sporadically utilised in Late Antiquity). The retreat to the type of site occupied in the Classical and Hellenistic periods emphasises a renewed need for defensive nucleated settlement. This type of fortified settlement previously came to prominence in Epirus in the 4th century BC, when the loose tribal confederacies of the region coalesced into more defined (although still highly fluid) political structures, not least in the face of threats from their more organised Illyrian and Macedonian neighbours. Around 360–355 BC, ten states or cities are listed in an inscription recording the visit of a mission by the *theoroi* of Epidauros. These states, including the Thesprotoi, the Molossoi and Chaonia, were very much derived from the earlier tribal groupings. Through the course of the 3rd century BC, the names of many of these entities disappear from epigraphic evidence, indicating significant change in local political structures and the expansion of certain polities at the expense of others as power in Epirus became increasingly more centralised, notably under Pyrrhus (Cabanes 1976). The fortified sites (which required the ability to marshal significant resources and manpower) developed in this rapidly developing political context.

While it would be facile to draw overly literal comparisons between the pre- and post-Roman periods, arguably both are characterised by fluid and rapidly changing local and regional power structures and the constant threat of incursion from neighbouring areas, both local and more distant. The movements of armed groups of varying sizes would have contributed to an insecurity that increased the population's reliance on fortified citadels that were less accessible from agricultural land and the well-watered pastures of the valleys that saw most occupation during the Roman period. Equally, the symbolic significance of these sites for the early medieval population should not be underestimated. They would have represented the antiquity of habitation in the region and would thus have resonance for groups keen to affirm territorial rights and primacy over incoming migrants.

The archaeology of Butrint and the hilltop sites confirms that from the mid-7th century we are looking at a society that held very limited contact with wider Mediterranean networks. In the late Roman period, these networks were based around a combination of private trade and state-supported supply systems linked to the *annona*, although the precise mechanisms through which they functioned remain opaque (Reynolds 2003). Only Butrint and Aphiona have produced clear evidence of maritime connections in this period and the concentration of finds around these small nuclei indicates that access to such trade was poor. Imported material that arrived at these two locations was not apparently widely circulated outside them. Although the limited nature of the archaeological evidence may exaggerate this lack of connectivity it seems unlikely that future discoveries will significantly alter the picture of a region in which production and exchange was very localised.

The withdrawal of Epirus from Mediterranean networks is also illustrated by the clear absence of a coin-based economic system (an absence noted in much of Greece for this period). At Butrint no coins were recovered in the 8th-century destruction levels in the western defences, although the 7th-century *follis* was found in some re-deposited material in Tower 2. When coinage does return in the 9th century, its circulation is extremely limited, and only from the late 9th century does circulation begin to expand. Although the earliest coin from the Vrina Plain dates to the reign of Michael II (820–829), in the walled town of Butrint the earliest is of Basil I (867–886). The provenance of the 9th- and early 10th-century coins from Butrint is exclusively Sicilian (although perhaps arriving via southern Italy) (Papadopoulou 2012b, 312–313). This picture of strong connections with southern Italy is reinforced by the dominance of Otranto amphorae in the Vrina Plain assemblage. Butrint's connections with Sicily and Calabria are also demonstrated in the Life of St Elias the Younger, relating how St Elias was arrested at Butrint when en route from Sparta to Sicily, while in AD 904, following his death

in Thessalonica, his relics were returned to Calabria via Butrint (Rossi Taibbi 1962, XIII, 42, 153–154, c. 28). The combination of numismatic and textual sources and the evidence of the seals indicate that in the late 9th and early 10th centuries, Butrint occupied a significant position on the route from Sicily and Calabria to the east.

Elsewhere in Epirus, in common with much of Greece and the Adriatic, coin circulation remains very limited in the 9th century. Veikou's list of coins recovered from the area of Epirus surveyed in her 2012 volume includes only two 9th-century *folles* from Naupaktos (outside *Epirus Vetus*) (Veikou 2012a, 252, 256), while Papadopoulou's survey (2012b) of coins from Albania demonstrates that, apart from Butrint, really only Dyrrhachium, at the western end of the *Via Egnatia*, was in receipt of coins during the 9th century. At Dyrrhachium, like Butrint, coins of Leo VI form a dominant part of the assemblage, indicating that both these coastal towns were participating in a political and economic system from which other settlements were excluded.

The restricted orbit of Byzantine power in the 9th century is also suggested by the concentration of evidence to the south of Epirus on the northern coast of the Gulf of Patras, particularly the island of Kephallenia, whose officials are recorded on numerous seals from the 8th and 9th centuries (Veikou 2012a, 242–248). In the 10th century, power was focused on Naupaktos, which was the seat of the *strategos* and metropolitan of Nikopolis, whose attachment to Nikopolis itself seems to have been purely nominal. Evidence from excavations of the basilica at Kato Vasiliki, close to the Gulf of Patras, includes graves possibly dating to the 7th–9th centuries, with grave goods including a Corinth-type buckle in iron (Veikou 2012a, 234–236). This would suggest that the northern coastal strip between Kephallenia and Naupaktos, like Butrint, participated in the restricted maritime networks of the Early Middle Ages.

In contrast, the archaeological evidence for occupation of the hilltop sites and islands (and indeed lowland sites in Epirus) in the 8th and 9th centuries is non-existent, with the exception of that from Aphiona. This could point to both a demographic collapse linked to the forced migration suggested by textual sources and an impoverished material culture or a combination of the two factors. It could also be argued that occupation of the hilltops and islands was a short-lived phenomenon of the 6th to early 7th centuries and that people, perhaps an immigrant population, were living elsewhere, perhaps at sites that would not be revealed by the archaeological strategies adopted in the region to date. Archaeological investigation of Epirus has traditionally focused on *known* sites, usually identified through the presence of standing remains from classical antiquity, and if the early medieval settlement pattern differed from that of antiquity, the chances of finding archaeological evidence for it would be considerably reduced. Certainly the distribution of Slav place-names and the Slavic vocabulary that remains

within the Albanian language are consistent with the occupation of lowland areas suitable for arable farming and stock-rearing. Archaeological evidence from the area of the so-called 'Prague civilization' further reinforces the suggestion that an incoming Slav population favoured lowland areas and valley floors (Bowden 2003a, 212–214).

In conclusion, I would suggest that the evidence from Epirus supports the idea of a fragmented and fluid society in the 7th–10th centuries with power focused around small groups and individuals. Some of these individuals, sometimes with official recognition from the restricted Byzantine State, were in control of relationships with the outside world and controlled access to imported material culture, in ways not dissimilar to those postulated elsewhere in early medieval Europe. However, in order to understand this further we need archaeologists and archaeological methodologies that will specifically address the key questions that remain about life in the insecure world of 8th- to 10th-century Epirus.

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