REPORT ON BUTRINT CAMPAIGN 2014

Corpus of the mosaics of Albania

Dates

The mission began on 2014, June the 15th in Tirana, with the official visits to the French Embassy and preparation of the mission (renting a car, buying equipment …). Some of us arrived in Butrint on June 19th and 20th. The others came during the following week.

We stayed there until July 14th, and the mission ended on July 15th. Some restoration and closing lasted longer wunder the direction of Agron Islami.

A team of 8 participants

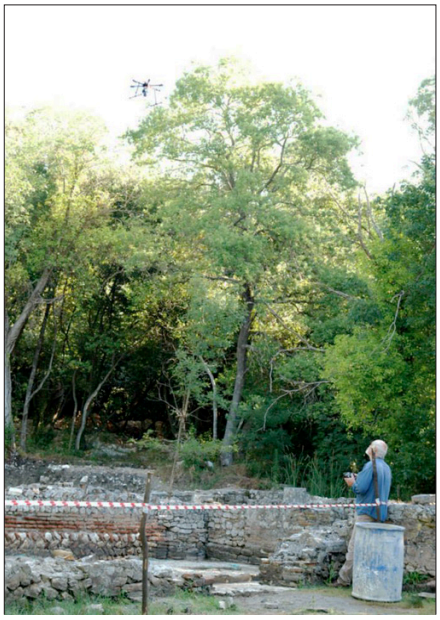
Agron Islami (restorer, ALB), Marie Patricia Raynaud (researcher, FRA), Didier Dubois (photographer and restorer, FRA), Astrid Maréchaux (restorer, FRA), Klejdi Zguro (restorer, ALB), Elisabetta Neri (researcher, ITA), Mishko Tutkovski (Researcher, FYROM), Berbis Islami (Student, ALB).

Six local workers were employed during the whole month, both for restoration interventions and uncovering-covering the mosaics.

The first team of five persons gathered in 2013 (A. Islami, M.-P. Raynaud, D. Dubois, K. Zguro and A. Maréchaux) has been enlarged in 2014, thank to the Butrint Foundation Grant.

Agron Islami (chief restorer, Institute of Cultural Monuments in Tirana) and Marie-Patricia Raynaud (researcher-engineer, specialist of mosaics, CNRS UMR 8167 Paris) assumed together the responsibility of the campaign, both for the restoration and the study of the pavements.

During this campaign, Didier Dubois pioneered for the first time on mosaics a special drone (prepared on this purpose), in order to take orthogonal photographs from 15 to 25 meter altitude (fig.1). After a few emotional events (wind and rain), the results were highly satisfying, completing the documents supplied by the monopod (6 meters high, the monopod products excellent photographs that later have to be gathered into overall montages).



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After improving his first experience in Butrint, during the next months D. Dubois intends to use very special camera and lens, that should even give better results.
Astrid Maréchaux, after taking her restorer diploma in June, was very efficient on site, particularly on the training of the new participants; she and Klejdi Zgurro, assitant of Agron Islami, were very active on the conservatives interventions.
The expert Elisabetta Neri, specialist of mural mosaics and of glass archaeometrical analysis, brought a professional approach on the unique remains of antique mural painting in Butrint, the Gymnasium nympheum. She will complete the technical description and microscopic field study with physical and chemical analysis during the winter, mainly in the Louvre Laboratories (PIXE-PIGE analysis).

A young student in archaeology from Tirana, Berbis, joined us for two weeks, and was trained to make the layout of mosaics; she learned the bases of the conservative interventions (fig.2). She plans to get specialized on mosaics and will work on the Corpus with us.
Mishko Tutkovski, archaeologist from the Republic of Macedonia (Fyrom) also spent ten days in Butrint. Specialist of pavements, he recently published an excellent book on the mosaics at Ohrid (Master 1, 2014) and prepares a Master 2 about the Cathedral of Stobi, where he has been working as mosaic conservator since last spring ; he intends to initiate a Corpus of the mosaics of Macedonia. He will participate previously to a few campaigns about the Corpus of the Mosaics of Albania before starting his work on his own country, with maybe

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the technical supply of our team. We trained him on our methods (analysis, description of pavements, conservation (fig.3), photographs

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with specialised materials – monopod (fig.4) and drone– and mosaic layout). One of the aim of the Corpus is to get students trained to make drawings, descriptions, photographs and get first knowledge about conservative interventions on mosaics.

Accommodation was taken in a hotel in Ksamil, Hotel Driloni, where we had our meals. The weather was fine from June 20th to July 8th, but this mild period was unfortunately followed by a week of heavy rains that slowed and sometimes stopped the work on the mosaics and caused some conservation problems on the newly restored areas as well as on the others.

Visits

We had a few visits on the field during our stay: Bryan Ayers, from the Butrint Foundation was quite enthusiastic about what he saw and gave us some very useful advices; Lady Rothschild unfortunately could

not honour us with her presence but sent two friends of hers; we had excellent relationships with Raymond Kola, the Director of the Archaeological Park; Smerald Kola of "Butrint Heritage" was helpful as usual; Luan Përzhita, the director of IAT dropped by for a short visit.

Program

We were able to achieve most of 2014 year plans, but we had to make some changes on the predicted areas to be worked on, because of exceptionally bad weather.

1. Baths near the Theatre

We began the work by the large Roman mosaic preserved in the apodyterium. This mosaic (9.60 x 10.20 m) decorates the floor of the largest room of the Baths (fig.5), still partly surrounded by a later bench seat laid out above the pavement. The water was evacuated through a perforated slab, laying in the centre of the mosaic at the same level. Remnants of a fountain are visible in a corner of the room. The pavement is typical from the Roman mosaic style in Butrint. It is a large black and white carpet of geometric *peltae*, underlined by a fine border, and surrounded by two red bands of local stone. The pavement, in a good state of preservation, was left open for the visitors during the whole mission. The conservative interventions consisted in removing most of the

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previous lacunae's fillings (made of cement) and replacing them with adapted lime mortar. A few small degradations occurred in the cracks after strong rains in July, and our team of restorers spent the last days on their fixing (fig.6), before putting back the convenient protection of film and sand.

A similar overall organisation of mosaic decoration is to be seen in other Roman pavements of the town and surrounding sites, where the very particular habit of encircling the black and white geometric carpet with large red bands is to be noticed (Building to the N of the Great Basilica, Columbarium, Gymnasium and Vrina Roman settlement). The manner of this single workshop is going to be better known through the study of all these unpublished examples, in and around Butrint, during the next campaigns on the site. Local stones (three different colours lime-stones) are used and the choice of simple motifs is balanced by a very neat, regular and skilled design.

2. Baptistery Annex

After opening the mosaic of the Baptistery Annex (7.20 x 9.50 m; the Baptistery itself was studied and documented in 2013), the whole team worked there for a few days, some time interrupted by high water level of the lake and infiltrations on the pavement, that forced us to wait before cleaning this mosaic. The surface of this pavement is extremely blistered and undulating (fig.7), probably because of the damp environment in this low part of the town and of a worn out basement. A small sounding was made into a lacuna, that revealed the constitution

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of the support in two main layers under the tesserae. Immediately under the thin mortar in which tesserae were pressed, we discovered a layer of fragments of tiles, set on edge obliquely and using almost no mortar, forming a support all together flexible and firm (fig.8). The choice of such a particular technic

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is attested in other quite rare cases, always presenting uncertain stability of their underground. We observe it: in Vrina, under the mosaic of the church nave, in a similar case of pavement set on a very low land and humid environment; in Byllis, in the apse and the sanctuary of Basilica E, whose Eastern part is highly filled in above the steep slope of the hill; and in Xanthos (Turkey) in the East basilica S. narthex, under the newly rebuilt pavement after a strong earthquake that struggled the whole church, particularly on sectors settled on backfilling. Unfortunately in Butrint, the efficiency of this apparently adapted kind of support is minimized by the fact that the tiles and sherds were settled obliquely instead of vertically. This disposition caused infiltrations of mud between the elements, and probably originated the swellings and blisters of the mosaic surface. Under this terracotta layer is the lower levelling layer made of small stones.

The design of the mosaic itself, if not very beautiful (fig.9), is of great interest, most probably contemporaneous with the baptistery itself, but made by another workshop. Design here is irregular, with an obvious lack of preparatory design,

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as non-continuous borders and irregular form of the various panels show. The decoration is complex and hardly legible at first blink, because of its bad preservation state. It presents an interesting propensity to use original motifs, with a border of affronted birds facing vases (fig.10), and another particular and rare motif of border (fig.11). The poor state of preservation of this mosaic raises

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important questions for our restorers, who frequently discussed together on the possibilities for its preservation, depending largely on the financial aspects. The best and unfortunately the most expensive solution would be the difficult removing of it, the preparation (after excavations) of a new flat mortar, and the putting back of the mosaic *in situ* after heavy draining preparation of this final support. In other conditions, it appears impossible to realise durable restorations on such an unstable surface, with mud risings, in a sector

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most of the year damp, under salted waters. The careful layout of this pavement was drawn (fig.12), it will help us to propose a graphical reconstruction, important in such case of illegibility, that will also help in the case of removal.
After work of analysis, we were tempted to compare the style of this pavement with the latest mosaics of the synagogue-basilica of Saranda (from Christian period), probably both products of the same local workshop.

3. "Gymnasium" Nympheum

In the meantime, a very precise

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analysis was achieved on the mural mosaics of the so-called "Gymnasium" Nympheum (fig.13). Three niches present such decoration from Antique period, a unique case of this kind in Albania. The central niche contains a mask of Dionysos, the lateral niches kantharoi and vegetal racemes. Elisabetta Neri, specialist for mural mosaic and glass tesserae, has been working here for four days. She and Didier Dubois, our photographer, made macro and microscope- photographs, to be use in the further physical analysis (see annex 1). Samples of glass tesserae

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were taken, for archaeometrical investigation (fig.14).
In the Western part of the same building, a geometrical floor mosaic of a elongated room was uncovered, studied, documented and restored. This pavement presents many similarities of style with the mosaic of the Baths near the Theatre (fig.15), both obviously were made by the same workshop.

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4. Triconch complex
Triconch complex pavements occupied the whole team for 10 days, both for pavement study and conservation interventions. The restoration of the mosaic of room 24 (R.24) was continued (fig.16), but the work there was unfortunately disturbed by meteorological events.

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Strong rains were followed by the rise of the water level of the Lake (about 50 cm). The salted water flew by percolation above the lower parts of the Triconch settlements, situated very close to the Lake's shore (fig.17).

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Restorers saw their work wasted (fig.18) and interrupted by the constant presence of salted water on the new mortars filling lacunas on the mosaics. We could finish the study, photographs with monopod and drone (fig.19) and the technical analysis of this unique witness of the various construction phases of the area (fig.20), but we will have to open again the sector next year to carry out how these restorations have reacted to this unexpected flow of water.

We also achieved the work on R.25 and its fine geometric decoration of peltae, and Gallery 16 (fig.21).

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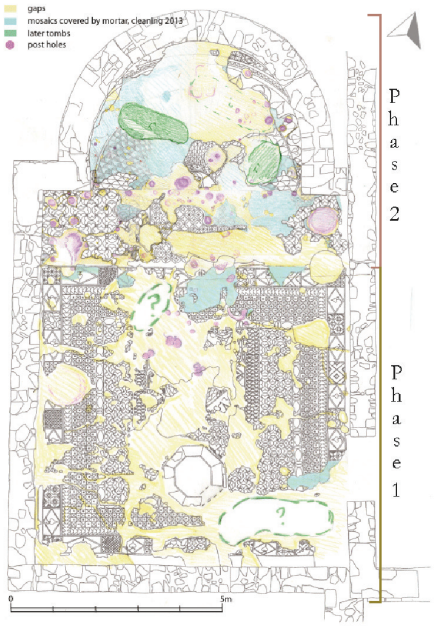

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Both pavements are the production of a single workshop using in particular very delicate and pastel colours (fig.22), quite distinctive from the two mosaic phases of R.24.
A precise layout and observation of this pavement proved that, in front of the central R.25 that opened directly on the primitive peristyle courtyard, the compartments of the

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geometric pattern of Gallery 16 were filled in with various birds (fig.23). Otherwise, the filling of the numerous compartments is exclusively geometrical, with a remarkable variety of repertory.

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We could not work on Gallery 18 and the mosaic of the Masks as we planned, as they were largely drowned under water (fig.24). We still have to work on these areas next year, if the climate is drier.

Acropolis Basilica

The clearing of the Acropolis Basilica occurred impossible during 2014 campaign, because of the amazing vegetation that covered the whole area, resulting from the constant spring rains on the region. The clearing of the ruins ended with our stay in Butrint, so the work on the church will be delayed to the next year program.

A new problem for restorers

The unusual high level of the Lake during the few last restoration campaigns, even in the drier period of the year, settles real questions on the choice and the durability of the conservative interventions: the mortars, made with lime, needs when drying (one month at least) to remain out of water (particularly

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salted waters that delay their drying), and this was not possible since 2011 (fig.25), because of too high water levels. Because of these very particular conditions, we fear the proliferation on the tesserae

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surface of micro moulds or cyano-bacteria, coming from the crumble and disintegration of surrounding vegetation in damp surrounding milieu. This situation is even complicated by the modification of mortars structure by adduction of salt from the brackish waters, during and after drying. Samples of moulds,

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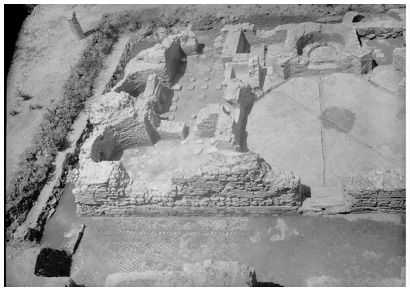
bacteria (fig.26) and water are to be analysed.
These alarming technical problems (fig.27) will be exposed and discussed as soon as October 2014 at the International symposiums of ICCM (International congress for the Conservation of Mosaics), where the restorers of *the Corpus of Albania* will show a poster and try to find solutions during discussions with the world best specialists of mosaic restoration.

Storage for equipment
The last days, we had to clear out the storage place where the team used to keep the restoration and technical equipment and tools. The first level of the Venetian tower, was previously used for that purpose, but will no longer be available for us. We have to find another solution for the next campaigns.

Archives
Last winter, Oliver Gilkes was so kind enough to send us the archives' photographs on Butrint, gathered from the Italian, Albanian and English successive excavations. We were able to recognize on the field most of the mosaics from their old views. Thanks to these photos we identified the pavement of the



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small Baths near the Venetian Tower (actually under water level) (fig.28) archives and now) and the mosaic of the Columbarium (fig.29), which had not been seen since their discovery in the middle of last century.
We plan to re-discover them during the next campaign, with the help of pumps, record their current state of preservation and make a diagnostic on the potential possibilities of their restoration, and document them completely before setting on the convenient protection.
The work of gathering archives will be continued in the Institute of Monument next Fall in Tirana, in order to complete the historiography of the site with the recording of all the restorations made on the pavements (photos, notes, dates and descriptions).

Re-discovering a fantastic forgotten mosaic from Butrint

In 2013, after the study of the Temple near the Theatre, we noticed that the central panel of the successive pavements (Hellenistic and Roman periods) had been previously removed (the date is unknown). With the dimensions of the hole formed

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by this removal (fig.30), Agron Islami and Klejdi Zguro could determine that it corresponded to a mosaic of the Mosaic Park in Tirana.
This fragment shows an elegantly rolled up polychrome snake whose head is unfortunately missing (fig.31). The various sizes of the stones and terracotta sherds forming the snake body stand out the ground, made out of pink hydraulic mortar sprinkled with white tesserae. Because of the presence of lead strips (fig.32) underlining the silhouette of the

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animal, this pavement, up to now, is a unique example in Albania of this particular technique, typical for Hellenistic time.
To find significant comparisons with other pavements of this kind in Greece and with pavements offering the same specific decoration (one example has been newly recorded in South Italy) should be part of the investigation work of 2015.
The subject itself of the mosaic absolutely confirms the dedication of the Temple near the Theatre to Asklepios, at least during its Hellenistic phase.
The pavement is nowadays badly exposed to weathering against a wall in the open-air Mosaic Park in Tirana. We wonder if it could not be transported back to Butrint in order to be housed in the Acropolis museum, for its safety, its preservation and the wide public's pleasure. Negotiations are at their very beginning and we expect this could be done soon, hopefully with the help of Butrint Foundation?

Conclusion

In spite of very difficult weather conditions, we were able to work on many pavements. We hope that we will bring to an end the study next year, in another full month campaign, in order to publish the very first volume of the series of the *Corpus of the mosaics of Albania* about Butrint *intramuros* in 2016.

Marie-Patricia Raynaud

Annex 1 - A rare mural mosaic in Butrint

The wall mosaic in the Nympheum is executed on preparatory layers of white mortar, rich in lime, with few terracotta and sand aggregates. The setting bed of the central niche shows portions of black and orange preparatory painting. The black corresponds to background (fig.33),

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and the orange to Dionysus's mask. The setting bed of the lateral niches, conversely, does not have any trace of preparatory paint, including for the *kantharoi* or racemes. The mosaicists, therefore, followed the painted marks in the central niche, and set tesserae freehand in the lateral niches, where the drawing is simple and the layout of the tesserae more irregular. The painting does not have aesthetic value, but are only a functional help to the drawing: in fact, the interstitial mortar between the tesserae is white. The cutting and the dimension of the tesserae are irregular, especially in the southern niche, and several errors allow to recognize the order in which the mosaic was executed. The central niche appears more carefully laid out. The employed materials vary: white, black, red, orange local limestone, terracotta, emerald green (fig.34)

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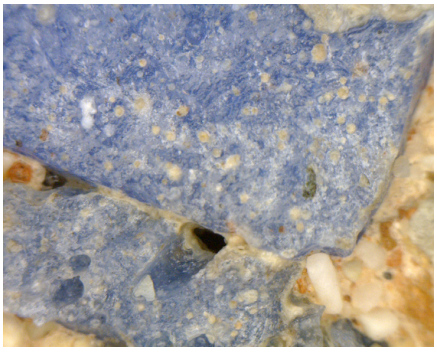

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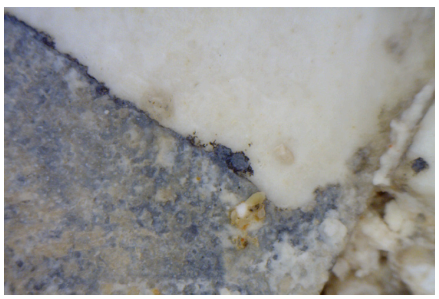
and two tones of blue glass (fig.35). White stones painted in red and black integrate the palette, to give different nuances with respect to these obtained with natural stone. Some of the tesserae in the central niche appear to have been painted black after setting (fig.36).



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These painted areas are not arranged in a recognizable pattern (fig.37). They also could have been executed at a later time. The use of glass materials is predominant in the figure of central niche, while it is limited to vegetal elements in the lateral niches. In this case, maybe, the layout of glass tesserae was carried out by specialized craftsmen and restricted to specific areas of the mosaic.

The archaeometrical analyses on the glass tesserae will highlight the kind of base glass used, its provenance and the chronological interval of its circulation. The coloring and opacification recipes, if compared to other contemporary sites, will instead provide hints of the location of the glass workshop that produced the tesserae. Moreover, clarifying the supply routes of the tesserae will help to understand the resources of the customer and of the craftsmen. The composition of the tesserae will be compared to other Late Antique mosaics with glass tesserae in Butrint (second phase of the Triconch and Baptistery). This will reveal continuity or disruption in the supply routes.

It can be observed, moreover, that gaps in the lateral niches correspond to parts of the decoration where glass tesserae should stand. This absence suggests spoliation and reuse in later times, as frequently recorded by written sources and archaeological findings. The analyses will allow to define if the tesserae removed from here have been used in other mosaics in Butrint.

Elisabetta Neri

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