

## The Antic City of Borsh

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### Abstract

The antic center of Borsh is situated in a 310 meters high hill, to the north of nowadays Borsh village, in the Southwestern part of Albania, on the shores of the Ionian Sea. In antiquity this region was part of antic Chaonia. On this site there have been research and excavations up to 1990 - after that year it remained out of the focus of the archeologists. Renewed fieldwork efforts, coupled with the evaluation of the conservation of this site, shows us that this center has been presented only with the fortification and the results of the archeological excavations in the necropolis, without considering urbanistic and the organization of the settlement. The documentation of all the antic structures identified through archaeological survey helped to create a better idea of the organization of this center, by presenting in these paper the houses and other fortification elements that were not presented on previous publications on this center. Fieldwork combined with the unpublished documentation of archeological excavations conducted in the 1980s offer a new perspective that arises out of the study of the urbanistic, architectural, stratigraphic and role of this site in the regional context. Borsh is a hilly city that serves as a very good representation of this category of antic cities in Chaonia's region.

**Keywords:** Borsh, Chaonia, Epirus, Fortification, Ionian sea, Hellenistic period, Stratigraphy.

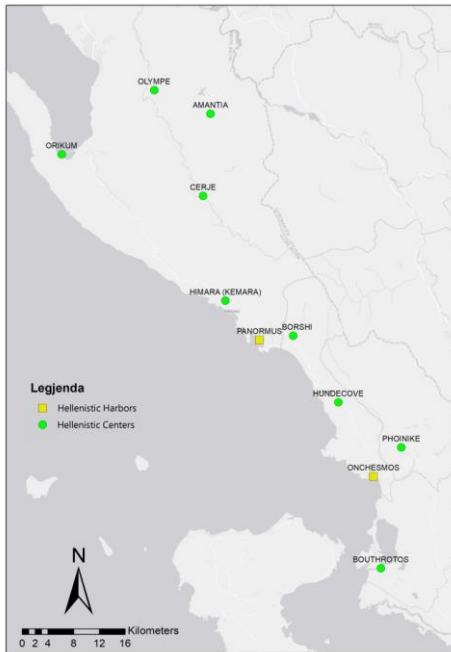
### Introduction

The ruins of the ancient city of Borshi are located in the south west of Albania, on a hill high about 310 m above sea level, north of the modern residential area of Borshi, by the Ionian Sea. The hill has natural protection from the north and north west, while the hilltop and other sites have a somewhat milder slope. Borshi's geographic position, between the Ionian Sea coast and the Shushica valley, enabled trade, cultural and political relations with the ancient centres of the territory of Kaonia and Amantia, as it was in a road link connecting these two areas. The coastal road provided communication with the ancient centre of Himara in the north and through Llogara with Orik in the bay of Vloera. The road to the south helped to communicate with Phoinike, the Harbour of Onhezmus and Buthrotum, while access to the sea offered an advantage in using sea routes, to keep contacts with other Mediterranean centres and the island of Korkyra, which is opposite.

### The history and problems of archaeological research

This site has attracted the attention of foreign archaeologists since the beginning of the 20th century and after the Second World War until 1990, it has been subject of archaeological research for different Albanian archaeologists. The first information in the form of short descriptions of topography and fortification is found in the Greek archaeologist Evangelidhu (1919) and the English Hammond (1967). Evangelidhu (1919), among other things, mentions some marble elements in the castle mosque, which can still be distinguished. More detailed descriptions and complete typological analysis of the fortification walls, along with the respective layouts, began to be published around the 1970s by several Albanian archaeologists, such as Budina (1971), Komata (1974), Ceka (1975) and Koçi (1977-1978). Between 1980-1990, Jano Koçi undertook several campaigns and conducted surveys, as well as archaeological excavations on the fortification walls, antique dwellings and the city's necropolis (Koçi, 1986, 1989, 1990). Only the results of the excavations in the necropolis (Koçi, 1987) and the material of the prehistoric period (Koçi, 1991) resulting from these campaigns, have had been published. After the 1990s, this site has been out of the attention of the archaeological projects and has only been mentioned in the general archaeological maps of the Albanian territory (Cabanes et al., 2008) and of the territory of Kaonia (Giorgi & Bogdani, 2012). Only the fortification of the settlement has been introduced, lacking a treatment of its internal organization. Although archaeological research has been partial, its data are the only ones that help to recognize the development stages of the

settlement in ancient times, as there are no historical sources and epigraphic materials that might show its history, and the ancient name of which still remains unknown.



**Fig. 1** General map with the localization of Borsh and the nearest centers in the Hellenistic period (K. Çipa).

### Fortification

The ruins of the medieval fortress and Hellenistic city are preserved on the hill, but the earliest stages of this settlement relate to the period of late Bronze Age and Archaic and Classical period. The fortification of the late Bronze Age should have been surrounding the hill ridge. This period is evidenced by test pits in the south west and south of the settlement, in the surrounding wall, in the southern tower and in a part of the acropolis at the medieval entrance (Koçi, 1986, 1989, 1990). Outside the walls of Acropolis is also found a dwelling of similar material (Koçi, 1991). Near the medieval entrance there is a wall of 4.30 m long and 1.40 m height, with quite primitive and not very elaborated blocks compared to the fortification walls of the Hellenistic period. The wall must belong to the archaic and classical period (Çipa & Meshini, 2017). The pre-urban fortification surrounded the highest part of the hill, an area of about 1.02 ha. In the Hellenistic period, this part is converted into a fortified acropolis, while the settlement extends to the terraced slopes that are surrounded by a second fortification wall. The Hellenistic Acropolis wall, which is not very well preserved, serves as the foundation for the medieval fortress. Regarding the fortification, the south western wall is better preserved. It is about 60 m long and a height of 4 m has been preserved. The fortification line can also be tracked on the north west side, where a part of about 15.40 m long has been well preserved. This line ends at the north eastern edge at a ruined quadrilateral tower. Another tower is located on the south eastern edge of the fortification, on a rocky ground. A fragment of a Hellenistic wall which extends to the north of this tower was carved in a more primitive way than the rest of the fortification and probably belongs to a later reconstruction (Cabanés et al, 2008).



**Fig. 2 The hill where Borshi is located (photo K. Çipa). Fig. 3 View of the south western wall (photo K. Çipa).**

In the fortification there can be evidenced two construction techniques. One of the techniques is the one with trapezoidal blocks of the pseudo isodomic type, where, in some cases, the brackets used often break the rows. This technique was used to built south western, north western and acropolis' walls. Another technique used is that of the isodomic type, with rectangular blocks of regular rows and equal height. This technique is found to have been applied at the south eastern tower and at a part of the wall extending to the west of the tower. The technique of pseudo isodomic trapezoidal blocks in the territory of South Illyria and Epirus dates back to the IV-III century B. C. The tower and wall of isodomic technique should be a later construction of the III Century B. C.

### **Settlement stratigraphy**

The excavations so far are insufficient to speak concretely about the stratigraphy of this settlement. Test pits conducted in the south western wall of the settlement in 1986 give a good idea of the stratigraphy. The first layer of stratigraphy is represented by late bronze ceramics (Koçi, 1986). During other test pits, this layer was also found at the part of Acropolis, where there was a fortification of this period (Koçi, 1991). A second layer is represented by archaic and classical material, Corinthian amphora of type A, as well as pots characteristic for the 5th-4th century BC (Koçi, 1986). A third layer is represented by the material of the III-II Century BC, also found during the excavation of dwellings on the south-west and eastern terrace (Koçi, 1986, 1989). Life has continued even during the Roman period, as evidenced by the cups and plates of the I-III century AD (Koçi, 1986). Borshi continues to be an important centre during the Middle Ages, a period which is represented by a rich layer of pottery of the XIV-XV century. The occupation periods in this centre, documented by the material found in the stratigraphy, matches very well with the ceramics reported from the superficial findings (Komata, 1974).

### **Architecture of houses**

The ruins of the antique dwellings are mainly located on the south western and eastern side of the hill. In order to place the dwellings, the steep hillside is organized by building walled terraces. Much of it is placed inside the fortification, but there are also some outside of it. They are partially oriented towards the sun and partly leaning on the natural rock site. Some of them are single-room dwellings, with a simple utilitarian function adapted to the steep terrain. Some of the dwellings, which have been excavated and documented in 1986-89, are two-story buildings, where the second-floor rooms are leaning on a rock carved to create floors and bases for setting up the side walls. The side walls are build up of large trapezoidal blocks, and separation walls with normal stones attached with mud. The first floor communicated with the second floor through a few stairs carved on stone. In some cases, as floor has served natural rock or compressed soil in clay form. The large presence of tiles discovered during their excavation (Koci, 1986) is an indication that the roof of the dwellings has been covered with tiles. The rocky settlements are well spread in the hilly settlements of South Illyria and Epirus, we find them very often in the ancient city of Orik as well as in the Acropolis of Amantia, but in terms of their plan and construction technique, Borshi dwelling are very similar to those of Çuka e Ajtait (Baçe & Bushati, 1989), (Bogdani, 2007-2008), (Islami, 2008). For the use and storage of water, common public water tanks have been used, as there are no tanks or wells in Borshi dwellings, as found in the dwellings of Orik and Çuka e Ajtait. Fragments of daily use vessels, tiles, and some Epirus coins found in the archaeological layer covering their floor (Koçi, 1986, 1989) date the dwellings back to the III century B. C.



**Fig. 4 View of an ancient dwelling in Borsh (J. Koçi 1986). Fig.5 View of the Monumental Tomb ( J. Koçi 1986)**

### **Necropolis**

The necropolis is located on the southern side off the fortification and, just like the inhabited part, due to the steep terrain, is arranged on terraces. Archaeological excavations carried out in the cemetery in 1980-84, revealed 13 cysti graves with simple architecture and a monumental tomb (Koçi, 1987). The necropolis started to be used in the Hellenistic period and was reused in the Middle Ages. Some of the Hellenistic tombs had a rich inventory, dating back to the III century B. C. In most of the graves the burial ritual consists of body placement, and in some cases cremation. The monumental tomb has a quadrilateral layout, fitted with a 7 stair *dromos*, leading to the burial room equipped with sofas (*Kline*), with a polychrome mosaic and side walls plastered with waterproof mortar (Koçi, 1987). The barrel-vault roof, covering the room, has not been preserved. The southern side of the tomb was made with isodomic technique. It was exposed in front of Jonian sea, while the other sides were under ground. The tomb was dated based on the typological analogy with the monumental tombs of Amantia, Selca and Matohasanaj, in the III century B. C. It has been stolen in antiquity and no material was found to decide on a more accurate date. The context where it is placed, in the centre of the Hellenistic tombs, justifies this date. As it can be seen from the distribution of the tombs, around the monumental tomb there are grouped some cyst tombs, just as it happened in the Amantian necropolis (Buzo & Hobdari, 2014). The architecture of the monumental tomb of Borshi is very rare and the only similar case is evidenced in the Drinos valley, in Jorgucatë (Giorgi, 2003). The excavations carried out in the early 1980 s give only a partial idea of the organization of this necropolis and of the architecture of the graves.

### **Conclusions**

The stratigraphy of the ancient town of Borshi shows that this settlement has experienced the same developmental stages as similar cities of the Kaonia coast, as Butrinti and Himara and Triport and Olympe in Amantias territory. The hill of Borshi began to be frequented and fortified in the late Bronze period. During the archaic and classical periods, it is re-fortified and it expanded on the hillsides during the Hellenistic period when it experienced a flourishing period. From the position chosen for setting up a residence, the way of interior organization with terraces, and the architecture of the dwellings, make it a typical example of the hilly towns of South Illyria and Epirus. Borshi is similar to Çuka e Ajoitit in the territory of Butrint, but

considering the layout composition with acropolis and extension on two sides of the hill, it is quite different. The existence of graves of monumental architecture shows that, in this ancient city, there were individuals who had a special status. From the topographic point of view and the territory organisation, Borshi should be considered as a Kaonia fortification that controlled the border with the territory of Amantia. Archaeological findings show that the city continues to be frequented in the Roman period, but it had already lost the importance it enjoyed in earlier periods, as in this period, due to the *pax romana*, hilly towns like Borshi were abandoned.

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