Slavery and Manumission in Greco-Roman Buthrotum (Butrint, Albania): Recent Archaeological Discoveries from the Sanctuary of Zeus Soter

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10th Annual Sienkewicz Lecture on Roman Archaeology

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Free and Open to the Public

Bio



Dr. David R. Hernandez, the Eli J. and Helen Shaheen Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Notre Dame, is an archaeologist who specializes in the material culture of the ancient Mediterranean. For more than twenty years, Hernandez has been the Principal Investigator of the Roman Forum Excavations (RFE) Project at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Butrint in southern Albania, where his team examines an archaeological sequence spanning more than 3,000 years. With the support of the National Endowment of the Humanities, Hernandez also directs archaeological research at Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, examining the Mausoleum of Hadrian and its afterlife. His research explores topics of Greek and Roman urbanism, topography, colonization, imperialism, epigraphy, and excavation methods, as well as the historical archaeology of the Late Mediaeval and Early Modern periods. Hernandez serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Archaeology and is a member of the Managing Committee of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. He received his PhD and MA in Classical Archaeology from the University of Cincinnati and BA in Physics from the University of California at Berkeley.



Abstract

Archaeological excavations at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Butrint, ancient Buthrotum, in Albania have brought to light the Roman forum (town square), built between 27 and 7 BC, under the patronage of Rome's first emperor, Augustus. Situated on the northwestern shores of ancient Greece (Achaia), Buthrotum was a seaport described by Rome's great poet Vergil as a "little Troy."

This talk examines the recent archaeological discovery of the Sanctuary of Zeus Soter (Zeus the "Savior"), which features a unique shrine with an internal natural spring and ritual basin. Three new Greek manumission inscriptions were found, dating between 163 and 130 BC, that were originally displayed in the sanctuary where the emancipation ceremonies took place. The discussion includes an analysis of the manumission texts, which furnish remarkable evidence for the institution of ancient slavery in the Greek world.

The excavations have also unearthed Latin inscriptions that show a different perspective of ancient slavery under the Roman Empire. Some of the greatest benefactors and most influential members of the Roman colony were freedmen (freed slaves) with ties to powerful Roman families. Two are identified as Augustales, priests of the emperor, linked to the emergence of the imperial cult in Roman Greece.