

A Late Roman Wall at Porto Romano

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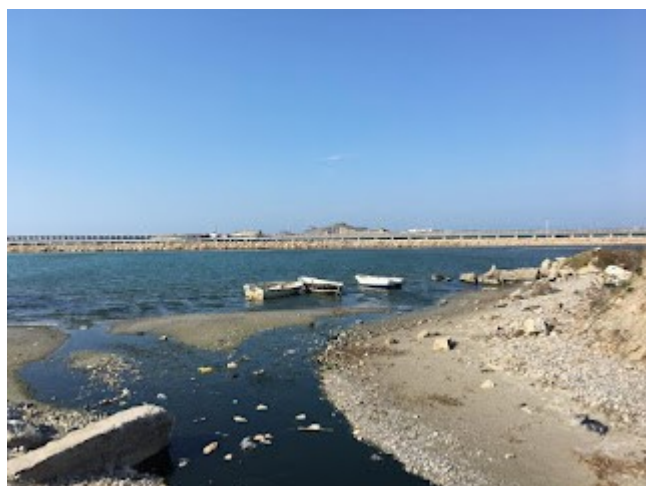
Today I visited Porto Romano to see the remains of a Late Roman wall, about 7km north of the city of Durrës. It's easy to find – you just continue along Rruga Aleksander Goga and eventually you will see it on your left, just before you get to the 'RomanoPort' complex.



Wonderful stretch of opus mixtum

Driving out from the city, you have the uplands on your left (to the west) and a very flat plain to your right. This c.10 km peninsula, with modern Durrës at the southern tip, and Porto Romano at the north, was within the environs of the ancient Greek polis of Dyrrachium. That's quite an impressive size for an ancient city!

The terrain has changed greatly since ancient times. The flat land to the northeast of the city of Durrës is now farmland punctuated by small irrigation canals but is actually reclaimed marshland, the drainage having been carried out in the Communist era.



The RomanoPort Complex

It is likely that the area of high ground was once an island that was joined to the mainland only by a sandbar, or may have been completely detached. Ancient texts describe Epidamnus as a city on a

peninsula named Dyrrachium, and Thucydides says it is on an isthmus. Over time the landscape has changed, due to a variety of factors, including rising sea-levels, seismic shifts and human activity and now even the marshland, formerly sea, is arable land..

A visit to Porto Romano today reveals a handsome stretch of Late Roman wall that is some 60 metres long. The purpose of the wall appears to have been to enclose the spit of land which was bordered by the sea to the west and the marshes to the east, and therefore protect the city from attack from the north. The wall was first recorded by French archaeologist Leon Heuzey in 1861. Heuzey thought that it was similar to the walls within the city centre of Durrës and therefore built at the same time. Austro-Hungarian archaeologists Kamilo Prashniker and Arnold Shober included the wall in their survey of 1816. They considered the wall to be part of the fortifications of the city carried out by local Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491 to 518). There is not yet a general consensus on the date of the wall: some scholars place it in the 4th century AD, while others date it to the reign of Justinian I (r. 527 to 565), who according to Procopius of Caesarea refortified Durres.



Lovely bricks!

Though only a 60m stretch of the wall remains, it is still impressive and well worth a visit. The wall is constructed of that good old Roman staple, *opus mixtum*, with fairly large well-made bricks and various rubble and stone layers. Some of the natural boulders used are of a considerable size. When the wall was cleaned in 2017 the letter Φ could be seen stamped on some of the bricks, but when I visited today (March 2019) the wall was quite overgrown and I couldn't see any stamps. The wall is about 1.75m in width.



The gateway

A square tower (5.95 × 6.15m) is preserved along the section of wall, but unfortunately this has been converted into a type of bunker (a bunker also abuts a further section, and there are others in close

proximity to the wall). It is still possible, however, to make out that the tower had an upper story, and the top of a fine brick arch is still visible. Further along from the tower towards the sea it is possible to discern where there was a gateway.

Conservation was carried out on the wall in the 1970s by Gjergj Karaiskaj, and it was cleaned again and an information panel added in 2017. However, it was very overgrown on my visit. As well as the vegetation, the wall has suffered damage from erosion, vegetation and human activity such as the construction of bunkers into and against the wall. However, in a way the bunkers add to the site – an illustration of the kind of protection used in the Late Roman period, contrasted with that of the Communist era.



The gateway is visible just behind the right of the bunker



Square tower with 'bunker' inserted

The site is not fenced off and there is plenty of space to park nearby.

Further Reading

Gutteridge A., Hoti A., Hurst H. R., *The walled town of Dyrrachium (Durrës): settlement and dynamics* Journal of Roman Archaeology, January 2001 14:390-410

Davis, J. L., et al. *Archaeological Survey in the Territory of Epidamnus/ Dyrrachium in Albania* Hesperia 72 (2003) 41 – 119



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Google Earth

56 m

1985

Date des images satellite : 21/3/2020 lat 41.374395° long 19.422314° élév. 0 m altitude 256 m