Saimir Shpuza

HELLENISTIC THRESHING FLOOR IDENTIFIED AT THE ILLYRIAN SITE NEAR BUSHATI

Abstract: The article deals with a Hellenistic structure situated *extra muros* of the Illyrian town at Bushati. The building was discovered in the early 1990s and interpreted as a fountain. Recent Albanian-Polish fieldwork at the site led to its reconsideration as a threshing floor. This fact provides new insights on the agricultural processes during the Hellenistic Period and leads to a better understanding of the peri-urban area of the Hellenistic Illyrian town at Bushati.

Keywords: Bushati, Scodra, Labeates, Illyria, ancient agriculture, threshing floor, wheat and barley, harvesting, winnowing

The ongoing Albanian-Polish project in Shkodra and its vicinity has contributed greatly to the understanding of the general layout and chronology of the Illyrian town identified within the contemporary village of Bushati [Fig. 1].[1] The site, spanning 15 to 20 hectares, is situated on one of a few hills surrounded by the plain of Zadrima, irrigated by the rivers of Drini, Gjadri, and Buna [Fig. 2]. Fieldwork has revealed some of the main components of the fortification wall and focused on investigating the inner space of this previously unknown Illyrian town of the Hellenistic Period. Our research has also focused on an *extra muros* structure identified in the early 1990s and interpreted as a fountain dated to the Hellenistic Period [Fig. 3].[2] This structure, situated at the foothills of Bushati, in its eastern side, will be the focus of this article. The building was discovered accidentally during agricultural works. Consequently, the Institute of Archaeology in Tirana organised two fieldwork campaigns directed by Bashkim Lahi. In 1995, the results of the excavations were published in the periodical *Iliria*.[3] Lahi's arguments in favour of its interpretation as a fountain were the architectural shape of the monument and the presence of a water source situated some 30 metres to the west.[4] The present author similarly points out that the structure has to be considered in relation to the ancient town situated on the hills of Bushati. In 2018, a general cleaning as well as some small-scale trenches were undertaken to investigate this structure. The main purpose of these operations was to integrate it into the emerging overall topography of the

[1] The project, under the direction of Piotr Dyczek and the author of this paper, is a collaboration between the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Archaeology in Tirana. It is financed by the Polish National Science Centre 2014/14/M/HS3/00741. For the early results of these excavations, see Shpuza, Dyczek 2018, pp. 251–282.

[2] Lahi 1995, pp. 231–240.

[3] Lahi 1995, p. 231.

[4] Lahi 1995, p. 236.

site. These operations allowed us to make some further observations on the monument as well as to reconsider its function.

Fig. 1. Geographical position of the Illyrian site at Bushati (compiled by S. Shpuza)

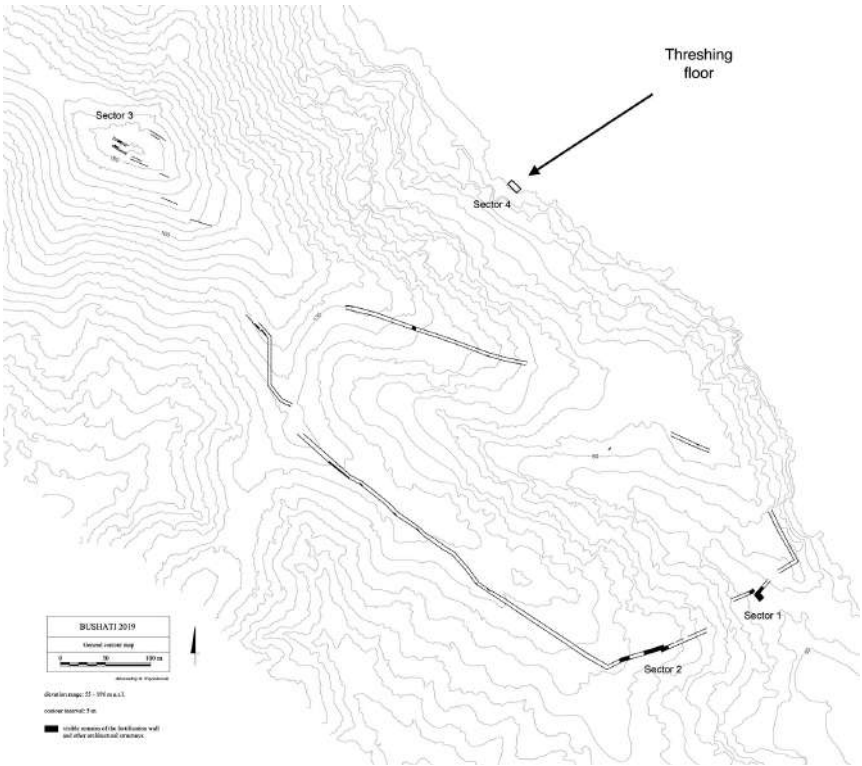

Fig. 2. Topographical plan of Bushati (compiled by P. Dyczek, S. Shpuza)

Fig. 3. Photogrammetry of the *extra muros* structure
(photo by M. Lemke, compiled by B. Wojciechowski)

Description of the structure and its interpretation

The structure has a rectangular shape, 6.30 × 13.35 metres. Four walls of different altitude, constructed with Hellenistic blocks, enclose a floor paved with stone slabs. The western and southern walls are the highest, with a maximal height of 1.70 metre at the south-western corner of the structure [Fig. 4].[5] The height of the walls decreases gradually towards their southern and eastern corners. Two trenches were performed by us outside these two walls. None of them yielded any material, as we very quickly reached the geological layer which consists of tuff rocks. This suggests that natural tuff was excavated and levelled in order to create a construction platform for this structure. As a result, the western and southern walls have acted as a terrace, which explains their higher altitude compared to the two other walls. The northern wall is preserved only as a row of blocks, while the eastern wall survived mostly as a line of stones without any particular arrangement [Fig. 5]. It seems that some care was taken to align the four blocks vertically in the south-eastern corner of the structure. On this wall, Bashkim Lahi identifies two entries. Although the way in which the blocks are arranged, simply confining the paved space, makes it difficult to speak of proper entrances, it is safe to assume that the structure was accessible from the eastern side.

Fig. 4. *Extra muros* structure. View from the north
(photo by M. Lemke)

Fig. 5. *Extra muros* structure. View from the south
(photo by M. Lemke)

[5] The altitude of this wall is given after the Bashkim Lahi's report. In 2018, during our fieldwork, a part of it collapsed.

Except for the northern wall, the other walls stand directly on the paved floor, implying their later construction. On the western wall, the Hellenistic blocks were placed horizontally, whereas on the other three walls they lie vertically, simply to limit the floor. The width of the walls varies according to the way in which the blocks were arranged – vertically or horizontally.[6] The current preserved height of the walls surrounding the floor suggests that they were not too high. Moreover, the monument must have had no roof, since no tiles have been found during excavations. Two niches are visible in the western wall of the monument [Fig. 6]. The northern niche is 56 cm wide, 60 cm high, and 70 cm deep. The slab covering it measures, respectively, 76 × 84 × 5 cm. The total depth is 83 cm. The width of the niche is greater than the width of the wall itself. Also, the southern niche has a maximum depth of 83 cm. Its width is 62 cm and the height 55 cm [Fig. 7a–b]. The floor of the southern niche is 8 cm below the floor of the structure.

As it concerns the floor, it does not show a definite rule of placement nor a standard size of slabs. No special inclination has been applied, as the aim seems to have been just to create a more or less flat paved surface [Fig. 8].

We were unable to provide an exact date for its construction, since our trenches immediately reached the natural substrate. However, excavations of Bashkim Lahi, which were focused on the deposits covering the pavement, testify that the structure was abandoned during the first century BC.[7] We can, thus, be sure that the structure was in use during the Hellenistic Period. This date corresponds with the most recent data from the excavations *intra muros*, where material from the Roman Period is generally missing and most of the structures seem to have been in use from the end of the fourth to the first century BC.[8]

Fig. 6. Photogrammetry of the western wall where the niches are situated
(compiled by B. Wojciechowski)

Fig. 7a. View of the southern niche
(photo by M. Lemke)

Fig. 7b. View of the northern niche
(photo by M. Lemke)

[6] The western wall varies in width: from 35 cm in the northern part up to 55 cm in the southern part. The width of the southern wall ranges from 30 to 35 cm. The eastern wall measures between 22 and 60 cm. Only the northern wall has a regular width of 33 cm.

[7] Lahi 1995, pp. 232–236, pls. I–II.

[8] Shpuza, Dyczek 2018, pp. 272–274.

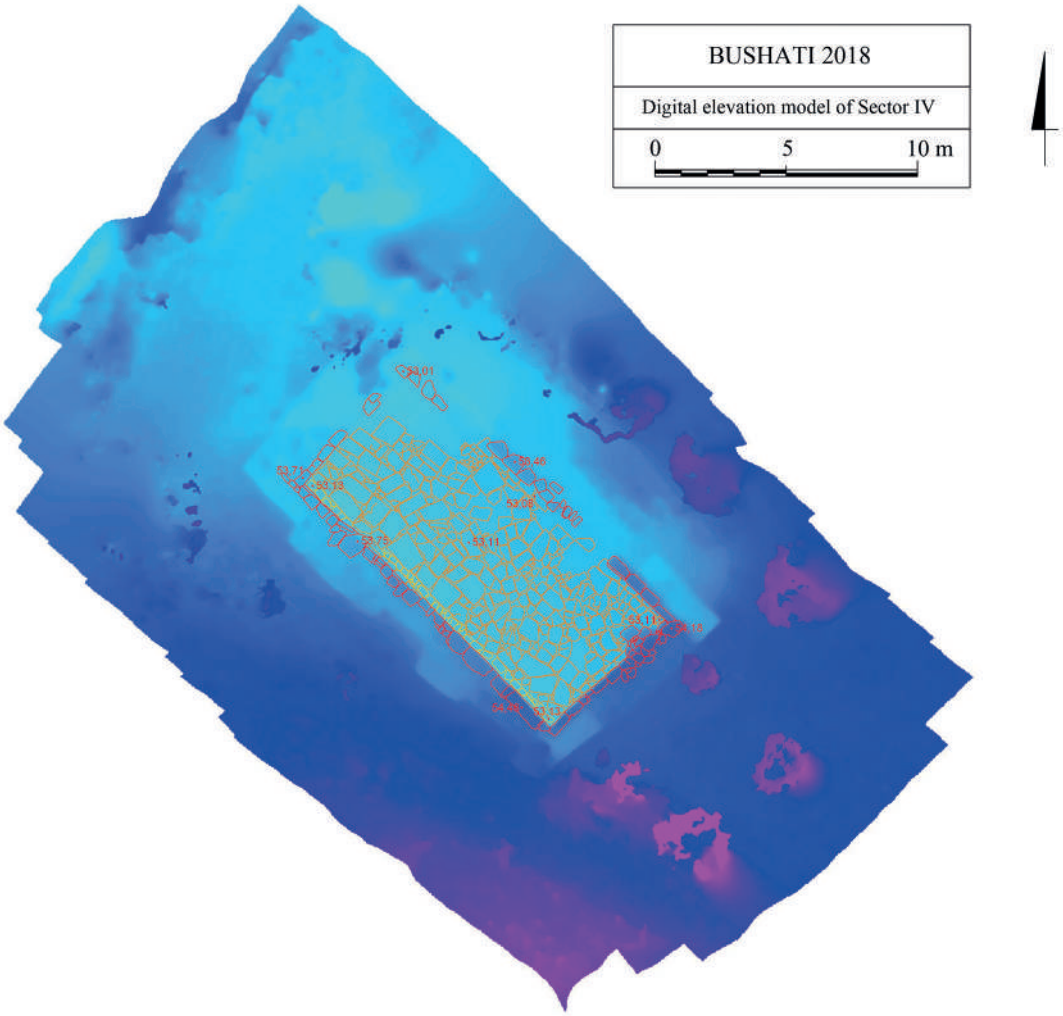

Fig. 8. Digital elevation model and plan of the threshing floor (compiled by B. Wojciechowski)

Identification of such a structure can be problematic. We find it unconvincing to identify it as a fountain. Despite its proximity to a source of water, water-supply installations (channels, cistern, and basin) are completely missing. Such a structure, consisting only of a flat pavement surrounded by low walls, bears greatest resemblance to threshing floors used for threshing and winnowing of wheat and barley. Most of the ancient threshing floors known to date are circular or roughly circular in shape, however some rectangular examples have been uncovered as well.[9] Because of the difficulties in their identification, several ethnographic and archaeological studies have been undertaken in order to classify and identify threshing floors. These studies have argued that such structures are found in open areas outside of a settlement, with a single hard surface, signs of trampling, and no artefacts, since the floor would have been cleared after each threshing.[10] The structure under analysis here seems to meet these criteria. Basically, as we saw in the descriptive

[9] For an example of the Byzantine Period identified at Or ʻAqiva in Israel, see Nagorsky 2017; for a Roman example found at the Roman Villa near Boscoreale, Italy, see White 1970, pp. 422–423; Whittaker 2003, p. 383, discusses examples from Cyprus.

[10] Whittaker 2000; Shahack-Gross, Gafri, Finkelstein 2009, p. 173.

section, the structure consists of a paved surface, easily cleanable, and limited by terrace walls. Probably, the eastern wall was intentionally left as a mere line of stones in order to avoid accumulation of water. It is situated in an open area and profiting mostly from the north-eastern winds coming from the area of the Scodra Lake and the Drini valley.

The trenches performed by us made it possible to understand that the threshing floor itself was installed on a non-fertile area but at the same time very close to the fields. Its constructors decided to build it at the feet of a tuff rock, so that this fixed structure would not cover any fertile land. This remark is not without importance, since in some areas where fertile land was scarce, threshing floors would be dismantled and remade every year because of the shortage of land, so as to re-use former threshing floors as cultivable plots.[11] Our small trench in the inner part of the structure, conducted below the level of the floor slabs, provided interesting data. A layer of white clay (potentially kaolin, sources of which are present in the region) was visible below the pavement [Fig. 9]. We are not sure if this is present everywhere below the pavement, but its thickness and its compactness suggest application on a large area [Fig. 10]. Its presence can be explained in two possible ways. One would be that it may have been applied to serve as a preparation level for the stone slabs. Alternatively, it represents the remains of an earlier threshing floor whose flat surface consisted of this beaten white clay and which, at a later time, was paved with flagstones and surrounded by terrace walls. Unfortunately, the trenches failed to provide material for dating particular phases of the structure. However, the site itself contains material going back to the Late Bronze Age.[12]

According to these data, as well as many examples of other similar features, we may be sure that this structure can be considered a threshing floor of good quality. Its surface is flat and made of flagstones, which was best for threshing, and it has terrace walls to prevent loose earth and small stones from mixing with the grain. The permanent role of the structure, as well as its area of *ca.* 84 square metres attests to the importance of agriculture in the town's economy. Admittedly, rectangular was not the most common shape for threshing floors in Antiquity, as suggested by Varro's preference for circular ones,[13] but it is worth noting that Columella's description of bean threshing floor refers mostly to rectangular or oblong shapes.[14]

Fig. 9. The layer of white clay visible on the small trench below the pavement (photo by M. Lemke)

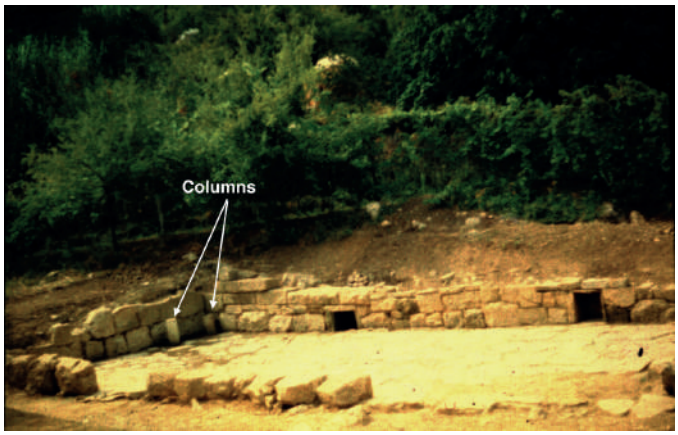

Fig. 10. Photo of the excavations of the year 1990 showing the two fragments of columns now lost (photo by B. Lahi)

[11] Tsartsidou *et alii* 2008, p. 610. This study suggested that after the crops were grown and harvested the place was turned into a threshing floor again.

[12] Shpuza, Dyczek 2018, p. 110.

[13] Varro, *Rust.* 1.51.1.

[14] Columella, *Rust.* 2.10.13; Spurr 1986, pp. 73–78.

Assuming the discussed structure is to be seen as a threshing floor, the two niches situated in the western wall are not so problematic to interpret. Recent ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological research has shown that niches are a common feature in the majority of contemporary threshing floors or drystone walls in general. They are very practical for storing pots of water and sheltering them from sun exposure.[15] In this case, even the proximity of the threshing floor to the water source is not casual, since it could have been a deliberate move by the builders. Considering that threshing was a task carried out during the hottest period of summer (July–August), water was without a doubt essential to appease thirst of those working.

In the excavations of the 1990s, Bashkim Lahi similarly found two fragments of columns whose role in the structure is difficult to determine, as this type of buildings were never meant to be monumental [Fig. 11]. It is probable that the columns were a part of other possible monuments neighbouring the threshing floor or that they slipped in with the earth deposits that covered the structure after the first century BC. However, their practical role in the process of threshing should, perhaps, not be neglected, since ethnographic studies in Albania showed that, in some cases, cylindrical stones, similar to fragments of columns, were used for threshing. Cords were attached to two opposing sides and the stones were then pulled by animals or people.[16] Unfortunately, as these fragments of columns remain lost, a detailed analysis which would have given important information in this direction is impossible.

Fig. 11. Some of the working tools found at Melgusha now exhibited in the Archaeological Museums of Tirana and Shkodra (photos by A. Hyka and N. Mlika)[17]

[15] Cagin, Nicolas 2011, p. 144.
[16] Shkurti 2002, pp. 276–277, fig. 48.
[17] All the objects found at Melgusha were published in Dibra 1981, p. 238, pl. 1.

The practice of harvesting and threshing has not changed since Antiquity, and in some areas of the world ancient techniques are still in use.[18] A specific calendar concerning the agricultural activity that existed in Antiquity has remained largely unchanged also today. Corn and barley are sown in winter (November or December) and harvested in spring (barley) or summer (corn). Varro and Columella, when speaking of the Italian climate, suggest that harvest was completed starting from mid-July and throughout August.[19] This should be the case in north Albania, too, as the climate there is very similar to that of Italy. However, regional modifications were also possible. Following the harvest, crops were brought to the threshing floor, spread flat, and threshed by crushing in order to separate the grain from the stalks. Several different ways for threshing the crops existed.[20] This work may be done manually with a stick or a flail, or by animals.[21] After threshing was completed and the refuse removed, the stalks would be winnowed.[22] After the grains were released, they were gathered together and put through a sieve to remove any remaining debris. The straw gained from this process was used either for animals or for preparing mattresses.

Living in the town, working in the fields

The proposed interpretation of this structure as a threshing floor permits us to examine an important agricultural space where crops were threshed and winnowed to release the grain. Moreover, it also brings multiple new insights on the Illyrian agriculture in general. Firstly, studies on such monuments are almost missing, especially for the Hellenistic Period, probably because threshing floors are not easily detected in the archaeological record.[23] Similarly, relevant historical sources are fewer for the Hellenistic Period than for the time of the Roman Empire.[24] Secondly, the threshing floor at Bushati is a direct testimony to the processing of crops among the Illyrians and to the organisation of agriculture in general. The existence of this structure is a part of an agricultural chain of operation: harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and storing.

However, due to incompleteness of data from excavations on the area, it remains unclear if the threshing floor belonged to the nearby Illyrian town or a rural farm that would be situated in its vicinity. The data gathered to date allows for nothing but suppositions. Judging from the topographic point of view, it seems more likely that the threshing floor functioned in a close relation with the town, the fortification walls located only 200 metres from it. Moreover, hypothesising the existence of a farm outside the town walls would necessitate presence of some protective structures meant for storing of the produce. For example, in many cases threshing floors are found close to towers where production is stored and protected.[25] In our case, the vicinity of the town is more of a structure serving the town itself. As a matter of fact, it is unsurprising that such activities as threshing and winnowing took place outside the town walls, because they had to be carried out near the fields and in an open space to profit from the winds. After the task was done, it was possible to store and protect the resultant produce inside the town walls. However, in the case of the threshing floor's relation to the town, we should probably expect to find similar structures in the vicinity in the future years, as only one would not be enough considering the size of the town

[18] Varro, *Rust.* 1.50 describes different techniques of harvesting used especially in Italy; Anderson *et alii* 2003.
[19] Varro, *Rust.* 1.27.3; Columella, *Rust.* 11.2.54.
[20] Columella, *Rust.* 2.20.4, specifies that the wheat was cut with a sickle and that the initial storage could be in the form of sheaves which would be beaten with sticks or trodden by cattle.
[21] Cheetham 1982, pp. 127–130.
[22] Thurmond 2006, p. 23.
[23] Most of the Hellenistic examples comes from Attica and Delos in Greece. See Lohmann 1992; Brunet, Poupet 1997, p. 776.
[24] For a collection of the ancient sources, see Amouretti 1986, pp. 263–281.
[25] Lohmann 1992.

as well as the fertility of the Zadrima Plain. Ethnoarchaeological studies have pointed out similar cases where threshing floors were situated close to each other. This was because crop processing there was performed at the same time and people helped each other and socialised.[26] This kind of activity seems to have been very hard and required a lot of manpower, which probably included freemen as well as slaves.[27] Anyway, most of the threshing floors were not paved and made only of beaten earth. Consequently, they are difficult to identify during archaeological excavations.

Considering all this, it is very likely that the *extra muros* space where the threshing floor is situated corresponds to an economic area dedicated to processing of crops. Important data on this hypothesis was provided by a deposit of working tools found at Melgusha,[28] situated on a hill just 400 metres away from the acropolis of Bushati. The deposit included: two sickles, two spades, two hoes, and two axes. Thus, this assemblage constitutes an almost complete inventory of an Illyrian farmer. The context of these finds is also limited, because it was a casual find made during agricultural works in the area. Their first publisher mentions the presence of a column capital as well as human bones found 10 metres away from the deposit. We can, thus, suppose that the deposit was a part of a grave inventory. However, considering the importance of such tools, as well as their non-negligible price in Antiquity,[29] it seems difficult to believe that people would bury them. We can suggest that constructions related to the storage of working tools were probably situated in this area, outside the city walls. Most of the tools are directly related to agricultural activities. The spades are particularly interesting, since they represent models with two wooden handles.[30] These were used to dig or loosen ground, to break up roots in the soil, or simply to open holes for plantation. The two sickles represent the common tool for harvesting[31] which Hesiod calls *drepanon*.[32] On the other hand, the double-edged axe offers an example of such tools' use in agriculture, to cut trees and roots, apart from their function as weapons.

There are many examples of threshing floors fulfilling religious and ritual roles. Such was the case in Israel as well as in many towns and sanctuaries of Greece.[33] However, this concerns mostly the threshing floors of circular shape, used for ceremonial dancing or as spaces for social gatherings. Equally, there is a close relationship between the agricultural production and gods.[34] Nevertheless, since our research in Bushati is at its early stage, we cannot make any meaningful supposition of this kind.

The existence of the threshing floor, as well as the presence of a wide range of agricultural working tools at Bushati, suggest that agriculture was the most important economic domain for the town. The rich and fertile plain of Zadrima, about 4000 hectares of arable land, constituted the main asset of this urban centre. The plain is mostly alluvial, as it was historically flooded by the rivers of Drini and Gjadri. Similarly, in the north-western part of the plain, the Buna River swamped many cultivable fields on what corresponds to the contemporary plains of Trushi and Velipoja. Very few hills are present, all of which are of a very low altitude, varying between 20 and 100 metres a.s.l. The only exception is the sites of Bushati, situated at 195 metres a.s.l., and Zefjana, situated 2 kilometres to the west of Bushati, at *ca.* 300 metres a.s.l.

[26] Whittaker 2000, p. 64.
[27] Bresson 2019, p. 122.
[28] Dibra 1981.
[29] Amouretti 1993.
[30] Similar examples of spades were found at Antigonea (Budina 1972, pp. 295–296, fig. 38), as well as in Lohe e Poshtme, probably a rural site in the territory of Scodra, not far from Bushati (Jubani 1984, p. 130, fig. 5). It is also worth noting that a casual find of an ancient plough was discovered in the village of Anamali, on the right bank of the River Buna. The object is exhibited at the Shkodra Archaeological and Ethnographical Museum. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Helidon Sokoli and Ndriçim Mlika for their kind help and providing me with photographs of the agricultural tools found in the territory of Scodra.
[31] Isager, Skydsgaard 1992, pp. 52–73.
[32] Hes. *Op.* 1.473.
[33] Wescoat 2012, pp. 83–87.
[34] Isager, Skydsgaard 1992, pp. 157–199.

In this geographical context, it seems obvious that the power of the local elite resided in the land and in the agricultural production. Wheat, barley, and legumes were the main products processed in the threshing floor, but the land and climate are equally appropriate for other crops, such as olives or grapes. In addition, the eastern part of the area is occupied by hilltops appropriate for pasture.[35] However, the territory of Bushati during the Hellenistic Period should be considered rather small, as it stretched between Lissus in the south and Scodra in the north – both of these important ancient towns would have access to the plain of Zadrima.[36] These circumstances, as well as the relatively small size of the *chôra*, suggest that it was possible to live in the town and commute to the fields to accomplish agricultural tasks.[37] Thus, there was probably no necessity to construct farmsteads in the countryside. Archaeological research in other Illyrian and Epirote towns has discovered the presence of agricultural tools in urban contexts, such as Irmaj,[38] Dimale,[39] Gradishta e Symizes,[40] and Antigonea.[41] This phenomenon can, thus, be generalised onto several medium or small towns composing a small *chora*. This information reveals a very close relation between the town and its agricultural production. At the same time, it indicates that most of the energy of the people living at such sites was probably engaged in agricultural work and the basic livelihood of the people depended on farming. Such towns were, thus, at the centre of the regional agricultural activity and likely served as places where grain (and maybe cattle, too) was stored. However, at the same time they provided its inhabitants with facilities not available in scattered rural settlements. Therefore, it will be very interesting in the future to learn more about the layout of the Illyrian site at Bushati. Was it a proper town with well-built houses and monumental buildings? Or maybe behind the fortification wall developed a settlement more resembling of a large village, that is, an urban organism which played its political role without luxury, without an agora, and without theatre and temples?

The importance of agricultural production is equally reflected by the coinage circulating in this geographical area. We lack any direct testimonies from coins of the Labeates, Scodra, or Lissus, but in the larger context it seems clear that the symbol of the *ear of corn* became quite common on coins, for example in Chaonia (Epirus)[42] and in the drachms of Dyrrhachium.[43] The representation of agricultural symbols on coinage during the Hellenistic Period seems to have enjoyed similar currency to the mythological symbolism or representations of arms and galleys.[44]

Finally, the identification of the threshing floor in Bushati, a modest discovery as it may appear, seems very important. Given that no ancient text describes the Illyrian countryside, such archaeological finds become the only key to its understanding. This structure reveals the significance of such constructions dedicated to agriculture for the Illyrians while simultaneously highlighting the bearing of agricultural history for understanding of the Illyrian way of life.

[35] Shpuza 2009–2010.
[36] Shpuza 2017; Shpuza 2020. We have expressed the opinion that the area of the Labeates corresponds mostly to communal occupation, because the same watch towers, for example, were used by the three townships. In this case, the agricultural land was, perhaps, also used in a communal manner, like in a *koine*. However, without epigraphic data it is hard to discuss the status of the land on the basis of archaeological finds alone.
[37] McHugh 2017, pp. 28–29.
[38] Prendi, Budina 1972, pp. 37–39.
[39] Dautaj 1972, p. 148.
[40] Lera 1974, p. 463.
[41] Budina 1972, pp. 293–298.
[42] Gjongecaj, Picard 2005, p. 56.
[43] Meta 2015, p. 238.
[44] Shpuza 2016, p. 198.

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Saimir Shpuza
Academy of Albanian Studies, Tirana
Institute of Archaeology
Department of Antiquity
orcid.org/0000-0001-8832-8104
saimirshpuza@gmail.com