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## **HIMARA IN THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD. ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL, EPIGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES**

**Abstract:** Ancient Himara is located on the coast of southwestern Albania, in a dominant position on a hill rising about 250 m above sea level. In the Hellenistic period, Himara was the most northwestern fortification of Chaonia and an important center according to epigraphic and historical sources. The few studies of this ancient site have been restricted to the fortification wall. The article presents new archaeological data from the survey of the site and its surroundings, in the light of a review of the historical and epigraphic sources.

**Key words:** Himara, Chaonia, Akrokeraunia, fortification, Hellenistic period, polygonal blocks

### **Introduction**

Studies of the Himara Castle<sup>1</sup> [Fig. 1] have been limited mainly to the fortification wall in the context of research on ancient fortifications in general. For this reason, observations have been limited and sources generally repeated without any attempt at a complete synthesis. This article discusses the current state of archaeological research on this site, while reviewing the historical and epigraphic sources in chronological order to demonstrate the importance of Himara in the Hellenistic period. The main focus is on marshalling the new data on the fortification plan and a more detailed study of wall construction technique, derived from a thorough cleaning and study of the circuit made in 2015 (including a new GPS survey of the fortification). Another important element of the analysis is a review of the dating evidence, including some newly discovered graves from the presumed ancient necropolis situated outside the fortifications. The picture that emerges from the data marshaled in this article substantiates the new approach to the Himara stronghold. The picture will be filled out once new data are made available from future excavations at this ancient site.

<sup>1</sup> Himara Castle is the modern name for this historic center and it refers to the medieval fortification. Epigraphic sources underline Himara's importance in the Hellenistic period, thus justifying the use of the name of Himara to refer to the ancient urban center as well.

### Geographical position

Ancient Himara is situated in a town of the same name in southwestern Albania, in a region corresponding in antiquity to the northern edge of Epirus and Chaonia. It lies amidst several other ancient sites, being bordered by the site of Borsh to the east. On the west, the Llogara Pass serves as a passage and at the same time as a border with the territory of the ancient town of Orikos. The Çika Range (ancient Akrokeraunia) and the Shushica River serve as a natural border with the Amantes. Panormus, or today's Porto Palermo, mentioned by Ptolemy<sup>2</sup> and referred to by Strabo as "a big harbor at the centre of the Ceraunian Mountains",<sup>3</sup> is very close to Himara [Fig. 2]. It must have served Himara as one of its harbors considering that the beaches of Spile and Livadh in the open bay below the city are exposed to winds in bad weather and hence unsuitable for sheltering vessels during marine storms.

The fortification on the north coast of Himara Bay is in a dominant position, the hill on which it was built rising to a height of about 250 m above sea level [see Fig. 1]. The hill lies in steep terrain, ascending from east to west and culminating in a precipice above the Visha stream. On the south, the fortification dominates the beaches of Livadh, Spile and Potam; on the west, the Visha stream separates it from the high hill of Skutara, while the hill of Andrehora is connected to a pass, which was the only viable route for an ancient coastal road shown in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and *Itinerarium Antonini*. Some low hills and fields suitable for agriculture, viticulture and the cultivation of citrus groves are found in the east and southeast. The combination of sea and mountain terrain in Himara creates the perfect conditions for development of farming and fishing along with trade in the area.



Fig. 1. General view of the hill where the Hellenistic settlement is located (photo K. Çipa)

<sup>2</sup> Ptol. *Geog.* 3.13.2.

<sup>3</sup> Strab. 7.7.5.

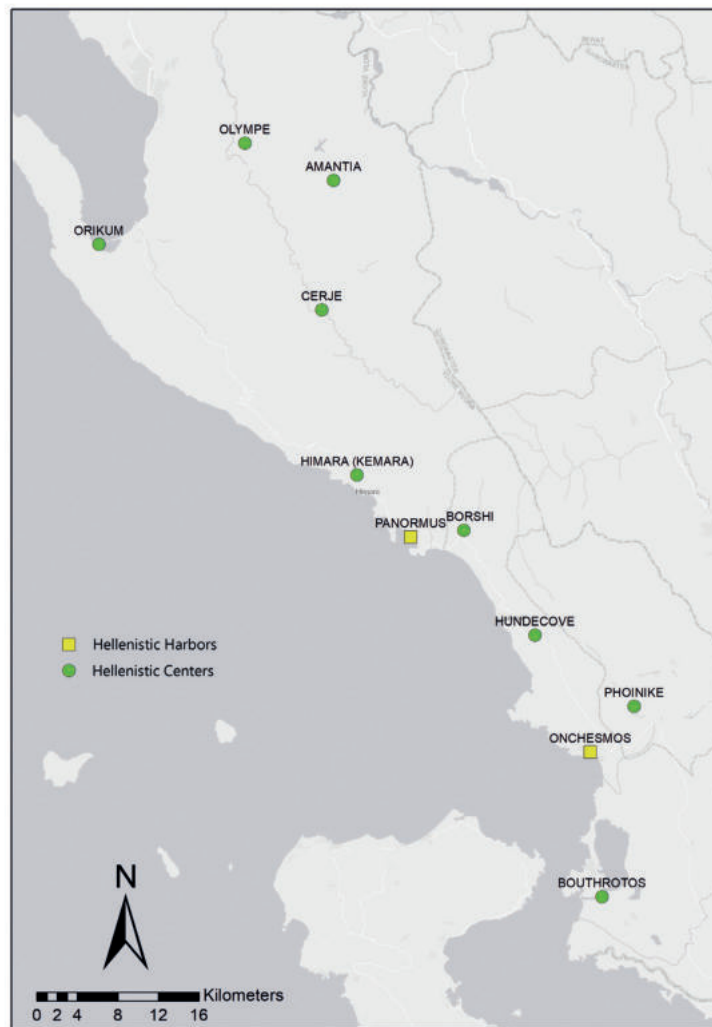


Fig. 2. General map with the localization of Himara and the nearest centers in the Hellenistic period (K. Çipa)

### History of archaeological research

A review of archaeological research helps to bring together material that has either been lost over time or is no longer stored in the original location. As with many other ancient sites in Albania, Himara was first noted and described by travellers from the early nineteenth century. François Pouqueville<sup>4</sup> and William Martin Leake<sup>5</sup> were the first to identify the ruins of this fortress with the ancient Chimera mentioned by Pliny. Leake mentioned an inscription, which is now lost. More scholarly descriptions of the fortifications were produced by archaeologists, such as Dimitrios Evangelidis,<sup>6</sup> Beaumont<sup>7</sup> and Nicolas Hammond,<sup>8</sup> who visited the site at the beginning of the twentieth century. They also described some structures and features within the inhabited area. Hammond noted a cistern built of antique blocks in front of the St St Sergius and Bacchus church.

<sup>4</sup> POUQUEVILLE 1820, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> LEAKE 1815, pp. 89–90.

<sup>6</sup> LAMBROU 1913, p. 281; EVANGELIDIS 1919, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup> BEAUMONT 1952, pp. 64, 70.

<sup>8</sup> HAMMOND 1967, p. 124.

The first reports by Albanian archaeologists date to 1950; they were collected and summarized by Dhimosten Budina in an article published in 1971, including the first plan of the fortification.<sup>9</sup> Only the northern part of the enclosure was taken into consideration in the discussion of the enceinte and the wall building technique. Additional information was provided by Damian Komata in an article written in 1974.<sup>10</sup> Neritan Ceka and Jano Koçi carried out regular archaeological excavation in 1984, but they published material pertaining only to the late Bronze Age.<sup>11</sup> The wall that they discovered in the northern part of the hill was 3.50 m wide<sup>12</sup> and followed a course which Koçi attributed to the Late Bronze Age owing to a typological similarity with the wall of Karos and the dating of the pottery assemblage.<sup>13</sup> The ancient fortification was also investigated by a team directed by Pierre Cabanes for the purposes of the Archaeological Map of Albania Project,<sup>14</sup> but the information included there was restricted by the very nature of this project. Another interesting approach is given by a brief study, which Enrico Giorgi and Julian Bogdani conducted within the framework of a broad study of the territory of Phoinike.<sup>15</sup> None of these works mention the ancient necropolis and they do not go into the details of the ancient fortification.

### Ancient sources

With the Ceraunian Mountains considered as the northern boundary of Chaonia by Pliny and Strabo,<sup>16</sup> Himara becomes the most extreme fortification in the northwest of Chaonia. The only sources shedding light on the role and importance of this center in the Hellenistic period are epigraphic. Himara's name is found in the form Χεμαρίων on a lead tablet found in Dodona, dating from the end of the fourth century BC,<sup>17</sup> the text is addressed to the oracle by the residents of Himara inquiring whether they should settle there (οἰκησις).<sup>18</sup> The source confirms the presence of a substantial community on the hill where the fortification is located<sup>19</sup> and suggests the time when the town of Himara took shape.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the third century BC, Himara's name appears alongside Amantia and Phoinike on the Delphic Theorodoki lists of Epirus, all invited to participate in the Delphic games.<sup>21</sup> The invitation sent to Himara (*en Kemarai Thoras Thrasimachos K*)<sup>22</sup> and two other important cities demonstrates its political independence and its rank as a *polis*. Its absence from the earliest list of Delphic games should be seen as proof that this status of Himara refers to the Hellenistic period.

The situation of the town is unclear during the Roman period. It is not entirely clear whether Himara was included in the *koinon* of Epirus organized around Phoinike after 168 BC (*to koinon ton Epiroton ton peri Foiniken*).<sup>23</sup> It was made part of the province of Achaia after 27 BC, becoming part of the province of Epirus in the mid-second century AD. The first mention of Himara in a historical source comes from the turn of the first century AD; in his *Naturalis historia*, the Roman writer Pliny the Elder describes a castle in Epirus: "On the coast of Epirus the castle of Chimera, over the Ceraunian Mountains. Beneath it, the source of Royal Water, the Meandria

<sup>9</sup> BUDINA 1971, p. 280, fig. 1.

<sup>10</sup> KOMATA 1974, pp. 179–181.

<sup>11</sup> KOÇI 1991, pp. 39–64.

<sup>12</sup> Jano Koçi, personal communication; the published version of his article does not contain information about the location of the wall, which can no longer be seen on the ground surface.

<sup>13</sup> KOÇI 1991, pp. 52–53.

<sup>14</sup> CABANES *et alii* 2008.

<sup>15</sup> GIORGI, BOGDANI 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Strab. 7.7.5; Plin. *HN* 4.1 (2).

<sup>17</sup> DAKARIS, KRISTIDIS, VOKOTOPOULOU 1993, pp. 55–60.

<sup>18</sup> CABANES, DRINI 2016, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> CABANES, DRINI 2016, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Giorgi and Bogdani translate the word οἰκησις as "city", but the meaning of this word is rather "settlement", see: GIORGI, BOGDANI 2012, p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> ANAMALI 1982, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> HAMMOND 1967, p. 657.

<sup>23</sup> CABANES *et alii* 2008, p. 99.

fortress ...”<sup>24</sup> The source of Royal Water (*Aquae Regiae fons*) is an underground stream on the southern edge of Himara Bay, flowing out on the Potami beach. Himara was apparently a *castellum* during the Roman period. Its declining importance is also evident in the fact that it was not included on the fourth century AD *Tabula Peutingeriana*. It reappeared in the sixth century AD following a restoration of the fortification in the time of Justinian. This was a time of barbarian raids and Himara was listed by Procopius of Caesarea in the form Χίμαιραι (Chimairai), incorrectly among the new castles built by Justinian in the province of Old Epirus.<sup>25</sup>

### The fortification wall: its plan, construction technique and date

#### *Hellenistic fortification*<sup>26</sup>

The defensive wall, which is about 270 m long, arches to follow the ground topography, its ends closing on the edge of the precipice. It encloses an area of about one hectare. The plan is simple with the wall running around the hill and the only entrance, protected by a tower, being located on the southern side [Fig. 3]. The design calls to mind the first phases of other fortifications in the area, e.g., Olympe.<sup>27</sup>

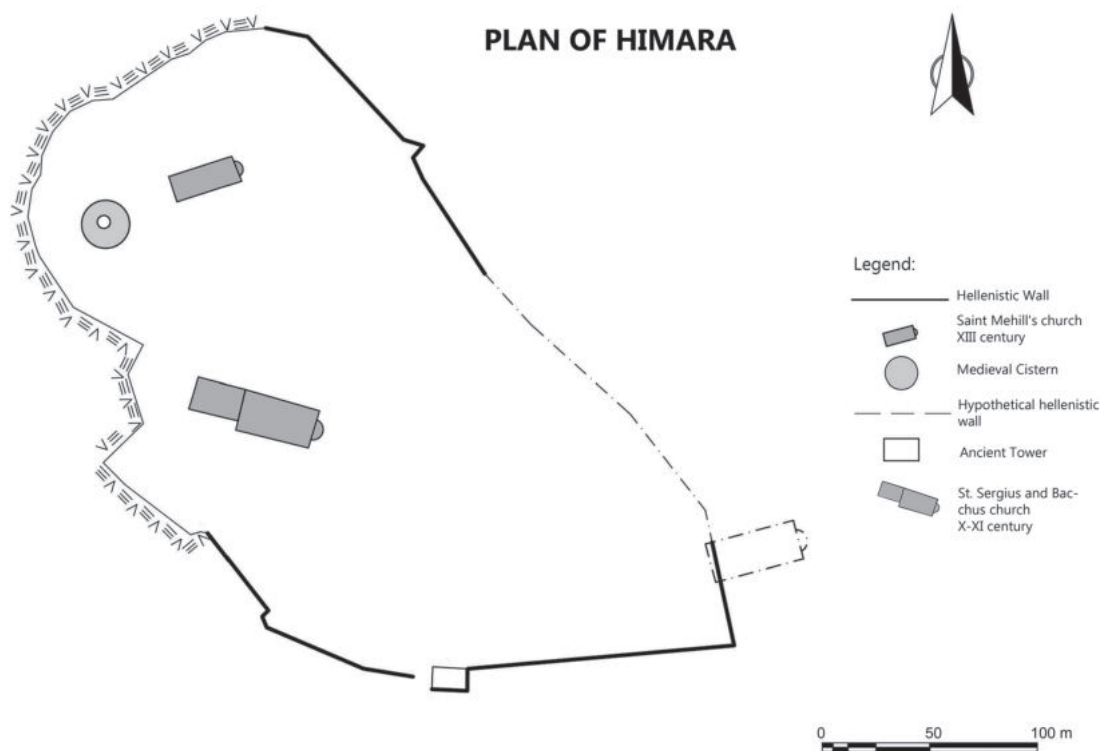


Fig. 3. Plan of Himara (after K. Çipa)

<sup>24</sup> Plin. *HN* 4.1 (4).

<sup>25</sup> Procop. *Aed.* 4.4.3; Procopius was wrong, because the fortification was not new, only restored in the times of Justinian.

<sup>26</sup> Following the author's verification in the field, it became obvious that Budina's plan of 1970, the only one ever made, was in need of revision regarding the eastern and southern parts. The eastern section of the wall, which could be traced in the gaps and through antique

blocks reused in the medieval walls, was not represented at all, whereas the southern line of the enceinte, extending beyond the church of St. Mary of Cassiopitra to the south, was not linear. In fact, it appeared as an L-shaped corner without connection to the rest of the wall, which is apparently hypothetical and wrong, see: BUDINA 1971, p. 280, fig. 1.

<sup>27</sup> DAUTAJ 1981, pp. 60–65; CEKA 1975, pp. 39–40.



The northern wall began on the edge of the precipice, adapting natural rock for the foundation. The preserved line is about 30 m long, the preserved height of 2.50 m consisting of only three courses of stone blocks [Fig. 4]. The blocks of the substructure are set directly in the ground and form a footing 18–20 cm wider than the wall itself. The blocks in the upper courses are mainly trapezoidal and quadratic. The dimensions of the trapezoidal blocks range from  $0.82 \times 1.05 \times 0.25$  m to  $0.90 \times 0.94 \times 0.45$  m. The joints between them are tight. Polygonal blocks were used in just a few places. At the eastern end the wall turns southward, creating a serrated angular angle.

The wall running south extends in a straight line for about 112 m; a small part of it belongs to the medieval phase made with recycled antique blocks. The most complete part is preserved within the St Mary of Cassiopitra church as its western wall; this part is 6 m long and 2.70 m high [Fig. 5]. The wall was founded on natural rock, levelled here and extending about 20 cm beyond its base. It consists of five courses of trapezoidal blocks. Outside the church, the wall runs for 16 m and turns west at a right angle.



Fig. 4. View of the northern wall  
(photo K. Çipa)



Fig. 5. The Hellenistic wall within the St Mary of Cassiopitra church  
(photo K. Çipa)

The upper courses of the southern wall are the only part visible on the ground surface for a length of 24.60 m and only 16 m of the course ending in the one and only fortification tower can be observed. The courses are more irregular here than in the northwest. There is a combination of polygonal and trapezoidal blocks, the gaps between them filled with small quadrilateral and rectangular stones, as well as triangles. The construction technique in this section of the wall is irregular polygonal [Fig. 6].

The quadrilateral tower at the southwestern gate is 6.70 m wide and projects 3.80 m from the line of the wall [Fig. 7]. In size and shape, the tower resembles towers from Cerje<sup>28</sup> and Olympe.<sup>29</sup> Four courses of the ancient wall can be traced on the front side, while the corners, preserved to a total height of 4.60 m, rise in six courses of stone blocks in a technique referred to as “Epirote cornering” by Hammond.<sup>30</sup> The tower has undergone multiple reconstructions in different periods.



Fig. 6. View of the polygonal wall (photo K. Çipa)



Fig. 7. View of the quadrilateral tower (photo K. Çipa)

<sup>28</sup> CEKA 1975 , pp. 40–42.

<sup>29</sup> DAUTAJ 1981, pp. 60–65; CEKA 1975, pp. 39–40.

<sup>30</sup> HAMMOND 1967, p. 124.

Traces of plaster and brick between the joints of antique blocks demonstrate interventions in late antiquity. It is the only evidence of restorations to the fortification in Justinian's time. Considering the state of preservation of the ancient parts of the tower, including later phases of construction, its original height would have been about 7 m. The tower stands to the left of the ancient entrance, where the ground topography left the gate open to attack; on the other side the steeper terrain afforded natural protection. The gate itself was restored in medieval times, obliterating the dimensions of the ancient entrance.

Remains of the antique wall on the right-hand side of the entrance extend about 30 m westward, below modern dwellings. The wall changes direction in a curve and climbs the rock to the north, up to a point where no fortification is needed anymore.

The limited area enclosed by this fortification is difficult to reconcile with the attested importance of the ancient city in the end of the third century and the beginning of the second century BC. This suggests that the inhabited area must have lain partly outside the enceinte in antiquity.

#### *Construction technique and fortification date*

The wall construction technique is not homogeneous. The trapezoidal technique predominates; the polygonal technique appears in places and in some cases the two are combined. Currently, only the outer facade is visible; the inner side stands against the hillside, but at points where the wall is damaged, one can see two facades with a core of soil and small stones (*emplekton*) and joining transverse blocks (*diatone*). The foundation stands directly on the ground or on natural rock, forming a plinth for the wall. The interstices between the blocks were filled in with small triangular, rectangular and quadrilateral stones. The wall thickness was 3.50 m.<sup>31</sup> These techniques required master builders to make the blocks adhere tightly.

Influenced mostly by Scranton's study,<sup>32</sup> Albanian scholars have generally dated the use of the polygonal and trapezoidal building techniques in South Illyria and Epirus to the fifth–fourth centuries BC. There is no such chronological typology in fact.<sup>33</sup> The authors of the Archaeological Map of Albania also dated the ancient walls of the Himara castle to the fifth–fourth centuries BC, taking into consideration the irregular style of the walls and the underdeveloped architectural form.<sup>34</sup> The dating issue is further compromised by the absence of data from relevant archaeological excavations. Contextualizing the urban development of Himara within that of Chaonia in general could give some indications. From a typological point of view, a form of construction similar to that at Himara can be found in Çuka e Ajoit, which does not go beyond the fourth century BC in date.<sup>35</sup> The other Chaonian fortifications, including also the main city of Phoinike, date from the fourth to third centuries BC.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Himara, the inscription found in Dodona can serve as a *terminus post quem*, confirming the presence of a substantial community in the end of the fourth century BC.<sup>37</sup> Thus, it seems reasonable enough to date the fortification of Himara to the end of the fourth century BC.

<sup>31</sup> BUDINA 1971, p. 280.

<sup>32</sup> SCRANTON 1941; PRENDI 1974, pp. 107–127; ISLAMI 2008, pp. 263–283; CEKA 1983, pp. 136–192.

<sup>33</sup> BOGDANI 2007–2008, pp. 233–257.

<sup>34</sup> CABANES *et alii* 2008, pp. 138–139.

<sup>35</sup> ISLAMI 2008, pp. 264–278; BOGDANI 2007–2008, pp. 233–252.

<sup>36</sup> GIORGI, BOGDANI 2012, pp. 355–395.

<sup>37</sup> DAKARIS, KRISTIDIS, VOKOTPOULOU 1993, pp. 55–60.



### Architectural features inside and outside the fortification wall

The main problem for any study of the internal organization of this settlement is the overlap of structures from different periods. Large-scale archaeological excavations are not easy to undertake owing to the limited free space. The ground is not scattered with pottery except for ceramic tiles and there are no ancient structures to be seen on the ground surface. Only a few architectural features have been found.

A channel running for at least 3.10 m was recorded at the western edge of the hill. It was 25 cm high and 25 cm wide. Siding with it on the southern side was a yard, 5.60 × 4.80 m in size, cut 0.65 m into the rock, with some stairs also worked into the rock. Apparently, these are traces of a building. Budina's plan also showed an ancient well near the St St Sergius and Bacchus church.<sup>38</sup>

Outside the ancient walls, a fragment of an Ionic freeze of the third–second centuries BC was reused in a house.<sup>39</sup> The freeze features lotus and meander leaves, as well as geometrical motifs [Fig. 8]. There is also the leg of a table dating to the fifth–sixth century AD<sup>40</sup> [Fig. 9]. Another architectural fragment of the same period is preserved in the church of St St Sergius and Bacchus. It is probably a screen from the sixth century, measuring 21 × 35 × 7 cm. Another ancient fragment turned up reused in the arch of a vault in one of the church entrances. Moreover, Evangelidis reported the use of ancient marble material in the interior of a house.<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 8. Fragment of an Ionic freeze reused in a house in Himara (photo K. Çipa)



Fig. 9. Leg of a fifth–sixth century AD table from Himara (photo E. Hobdari)

<sup>38</sup> BUDINA 1971, p. 280, fig. 1.

<sup>39</sup> PODINI 2014, pp. 112, 180–181.

<sup>40</sup> Now in the storerooms of the Institute of Archaeology in Tirana.

<sup>41</sup> EVANGELIDIS 1919, p. 281.

### Localization of the necropolis

The hills and terrain around the ancient settlement are all suitable for establishing a cemetery, but direct evidence had long been missing. A field survey recently located two necropolises. Some cist tombs were identified in a stream bed about 1 km to the east of the ancient settlement. A deep deposit of sediments and alluvia, about 2 m high, from the streams of Koram and Kastane, had obscured all evidence of the burial ground.<sup>42</sup> The graves are rectangular, of varying dimensions, their sides and covering built of stone slabs [Figs. 10 and 11]. Some of the side slabs are  $50 \times 54 \times 3$  cm and  $73 \times 50 \times 3$  cm in size. There were no grave furnishings. The architecture resembles other Hellenistic cemeteries in the region, hence the suggested date to this period. The graves are densely distributed along the stream, indicating that the necropolis extends over a large area.



Fig. 10. Cist tomb from the Himara necropolis (photo K. Çipa)



Fig. 11. Cist tomb from the Himara necropolis (photo K. Çipa)

<sup>42</sup> In December 2016, erosion of the streambed, caused by extreme rainfall and digging of the sediment for construction material, revealed the remains of some cist tombs in the Vacunero locality. They were seen by the

author about three months later when heavy rains had already damaged them; they may have also been looted by clandestine diggers by this time as well.

Some other graves were found 5 km away from Himara, at a locality called Kastane.<sup>43</sup> The graves are vaulted, very similar to the Hellenistic tombs already known from Amantia. They may have served a rural settlement in the vicinity or been the necropolis of Himara.

### Ties with other ancient cities

Being a coastal site isolated from the Akrokeraune mountain range in the north and east, Himara in antiquity was oriented to the sea, which provided opportunities for commercial and cultural development in contact with the Mediterranean. Without archaeological evidence from Himara, little can be said of the city's commercial links. However, material from the excavations of 2002–2003 in the Cave of Spile, situated very close to the fortification, gives some indications.<sup>44</sup> The finds included imported ceramics from Greek and Italic sites.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, underwater investigations in the Gulf of Porto Palermo give further indications.<sup>46</sup> Commercial imports to the region are substantiated by finds of amphoras coming from the western coasts of the Adriatic, Corinth, as well as the Aegean and Asia Minor coasts, starting from the end of the fourth century BC.<sup>47</sup> Imports from Apollonia are also present.

### Conclusions

Himara can be said to belong to the set of the earliest Chaonian fortifications. It appears to have been a peripheral coastal center in the northwest of Chaonia, acting as a fortified refuge for the rural settlements forming a restricted *chora* around it. It is a small micro-region or a small political-economic unit, of secondary importance compared to the major cities of Antigonea, Phoinike and Amantia. However, in the Hellenistic period it enjoyed a political and economic independence, confirmed by its presence on the list of Delphic Theorodoki. Its political independence apparently stems more from its geographic position than its economic importance. It seems that the imposition of Roman rule transformed it into a *castellum*, as described by Pliny.

Its absence from the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and *Itinerarium Antonini* is another indicator of the diminishing importance of the locality. It came back into focus for a Byzantine administration dealing with the very real threat of barbarian raids south of the Balkans. Fortified sites, such as Himara in *Epirus Vetus*, were instrumental in securing the coastal road leading from south of Epirus and to the coast of Greece against the raiders. That is why it was restored in the reign of Justinian. Traces of this restoration can be seen to a limited extent in the tower walls.

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<sup>43</sup> ÇIPA 2016, pp. 86–89.

<sup>44</sup> GJIPALI 2007–2008, pp. 114–117.

<sup>45</sup> GJIPALI 2007–2008, pp. 114–117.

<sup>46</sup> VOLPE, LEONE, TURCHIANO 2011, pp. 253–260.

<sup>47</sup> VOLPE, LEONE, TURCHIANO 2011, p. 258.



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## Streszczenie

### **Hellenistyczna Himara w źródłach historycznych, epigraficznych i archeologicznych**

Starożytna Himara leży w południowo-zachodniej Albanii, na nadmorskim wzgórzu wznoszącym się 250 m n.p.m. W okresie hellenistycznym był to najbardziej wysunięty na północny zachód punkt obronny w Chaonii i ważny ośrodek lokalny, o czym zdają się świadczyć źródła epigraficzne i historyczne. Nieliczne badania stanowiska ograniczone były dotychczas do ruin murów obronnych. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie nowych danych archeologicznych, pozyskanych w trakcie badań powierzchniowych prowadzonych wokół tego stanowiska, oraz omówienie ich w świetle znanych źródeł historycznych i epigraficznych.

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