

Greek temple discovered in Albania

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Image: A fragment of a tablet recovered from the Albanian site.

Researchers from the University of Cincinnati's Classics faculty are preparing to make their first public presentation of details surrounding their find of one of the earliest Greek temples in the Adriatic region north of Greece.

"This is a case where a hunch about the potential of a site is paying off in the discovery of a temple that has extraordinary and singular importance to Albanian archaeology and to the history of Greek colonization in the Adriatic Sea region," says Jack L. Davis, the Carl W. Blegen Professor of Greek Archaeology at the University of Cincinnati and co-director of the international research team working at the site. "We are gaining the tools for an understanding of religious life in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., a part of the early history of Apollonia of which little is known."

Presenting with Davis will be UC colleagues Sharon R. Stocker, Kathleen Lynch and Evi Gorogianni, along with Albanian researchers Iris Pojani and Vangjel Dimo.

The temple they have discovered, located in coastal Albania, is only the fifth known stone temple in Albania. It stands out both because of its age and its size.

The site is just outside of the ancient Greek city-state of Apollonia, and dates back to the late 6th century B.C. That would put its use in the Archaic and Classical periods, a time from which little has been recovered from inside the acropolis of Apollonia.

So far, in addition to remains of sacrificial meals and broken fineware pottery, substantial numbers of Classical and Hellenistic figurines have been found, although the principal deity of the sanctuary remains undetermined at this point.

"It now seems likely that the life of the sanctuary began not long after the founding of the Apollonia colony," Davis says. "What we discover here will contribute much to our understanding of religious life in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., a period that is hardly known from previous excavations inside the borders of Apollonia itself."

The researchers suspected the temple was large, but only recently determined its approximate proportions: 14 meters by 40 meters.

The history of excavations on the site, located on a farm known by the family name of Bonjaket, dates back more than 40 years ago, when a farmer's tractor uncovered terracotta figurines outside the walls of Apollonia. The site appeared to include remains of a sanctuary. An Albanian-Russian archeological team explored it, finding traces of brick walls and dating hundreds of the figurines to the 4th-2nd century B.C. Their work went unnoticed, however: the rupture in Soviet-Albanian relations in 1960 kept the team from publishing much about their work.

In 2002, Albanian archeologists, working collaboratively with Davis and other UC colleagues, conducted a surface survey. Measuring off a grid in

the low-lying land between the ancient walls of Apollonia and the Adriatic Sea, team members walked, painstakingly searching for artifacts hidden in the dirt and vegetation.

They found more figurines, the foot of a statue, a late Greek inscription, a small stone altar – and pottery from a much earlier date.

The combination of figurines, "which often point to ancient places of worship," and the older pottery led the team to believe the site was older than they first thought, Davis said.

"It seemed to us that the sanctuary was already being used in the Archaic period," some 100-350 years earlier than the 1960 team had believed, he said.

Then came the kicker: a family who owns a section of the land told Albanian team leader Lorenc Bejko that they had uncovered a foundation made of large, regular blocks as they were building a new house back in 1997.

Now, the UC-Albanian team needed to dig. Evidence was mounting that a large temple, not just a sanctuary, had occupied the site. The archeologists wanted to "trace lines of (the) massive ashlar blocks" that had been disturbed during the building of the family's house, Davis said.

After careful negotiations with the Bonjaket family, major work began in 2004 to unearth the true scope of the apparent temple. After two seasons spent at the site, momentum continues to build that many details about the religious history of the temple and the Apollonia colony are about to be determined.

The UC researchers, along with colleagues from the International Centre for Albanian Archaeology and the Institute of Archaeology, Tirana, presented their new work on Friday, Jan. 6, 2006, in Montreal at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America.

Source: University of Cincinnati

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