

Albanian Sites of the Roman Civil War

A large part of the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey took place in the modern country of Albania, at that time the province of Macedonia. As I live in Albania, actually in Durrës (ancient Dyrrachium) one of the places that played a prime role in the war, I thought it would be fun to illustrate a few chapters of Caesar's Civil War with some images of the places mentioned as they look today. So let's head back to 49 and 48BC....

After withdrawing from Italy and amassing troops during the winter of 49BC, Pompey quartered his forces at maritime towns along the Adriatic, including Dyrrachium and Apollonia (Caes. Civ. 3.5), alongside his fleet which was patrolling the coast.



The Bay of Durrës with a view over the port, where the ancient harbour of Epidamnus/Dyrrachium was situated.

Caesar, meanwhile, set sail on 4 January 48BC and crossed from Brindisium to near the Ceraunian mountains, landing at Palaeste (Caes. Civ. 3.6). There is some discussion about the identification of the landing place but below is a view of Palasë beach (taken looking down from the Llogara Pass), which traditionally has been identified with Palaeste.



Caesar then marched to Oricum, which surrendered to him.



Part of the monumental centre of Oricum. The city had a very sheltered harbour.

Pompey was coming back along the Via Egnatia (Caes. Civ. 3.11) to his winter quarters, and hearing that Caesar had taken Oricum, set off for Apollonia. However, Caesar got there before him and found Pompey's commander preparing for a siege (Caes. Civ. 3.12). The townspeople went over to Caesar, and whilst there he received envoys from the Bylliones, the Amantini, and the Epirote tribes.



The acropolis of Apollonia, which Pompey's commander was preparing for siege.

Pompey marched day and night to reach Dyrrachium (Caes. Civ. 3.13) and set up camp while Caesar camped south of the river Apsus (the Seman) in Apollonian territory for the rest of the winter.

Pompey's general Bibulus was off Oricum with his fleet, which meant that Caesar could not be supplied by sea, but conversely Caesar's possession of the land meant that Bibulus could not access water or wood, creating a stalemate. Caesar went south to Buthrotum (Butrint) to get supplies (Caes. Civ. 3.16) but returned for discussions of a possible truce (which did not materialise).



The civic centre of Butrint, which was remodelled around the time of Augustus.

Some months later, Marc Antony set sail with reinforcements to join Caesar, but a storm forced him north to the port of Lissus (modern Lezhe). Caesar had previously fortified the town, and now it opened its gates to Antony who, after sending messages, marched south to meet up with Caesar (Caes. Civ. 3.30) while Pompey tried to stop them joining up and, having failed, stopped at Asparagium.



Lissus, the acropolis in the background, and the lower city down to the where the quayside was in ancient times.

Caesar moved to Asparagium (Caes. Civ. 3.41) to offer battle, but Pompey kept to his lines, and so he marched north to Dyrrachium via a circuitous route and made camp. Pompey, wrong-footed by Caesar's manoeuvre and with no access to his war machines in Dyrrachium, camped on hill to the south 'Petra' (Caes. Civ. 3.42) which also had access to a harbour, by which provisions could be brought to him, while Caesar sent into Epirus and Illyria for corn (though the land was not very productive and also Pompey had laid waste the territory).



The summit of 'Pompey's Rock', identified with ancient Petra, where Pompey made camp.
There are traces of habitation on the summit.

Caesar then fortified the chain of small hills around Pompey's camp (Caes. Civ. 3.43) and built lines of communication between them, enclosing Pompey and his troops. This cut Pompey's cavalry off from the opportunity to forage.

Pompey could therefore do nothing but extend himself as much as possible within Caesar's circumvallation (Caes. Civ. 3.44). He built twenty-four forts in a circumference of fifteen miles in order to feed his horses and pack animals and sent out parties of slingers and archers. Skirmishes took place while the forts and lines were being built (Caes. Civ. 3.45/6) and while a stalemate persisted (Caes. Civ. 3.51). On one day no less than six actions took place (Caes. Civ. 3.53) three near Dyrrachium, and three about the lines.

Meanwhile, Caesar drew up his army every day, offering Pompey battle (Caes. Civ. 3.55) but the stalemate persisted. Finally, with his horses dying because of the lack of fodder, Pompey decided to attempt to force the barricade (Caes. Civ. 3.58). Deserters had told him that Caesar's 18-mile circumvallation had not been quite completed at its southern point where it met at the sea (Caes. Civ. 3.63) and so it was here that Pompey broke through in a desperate battle.



The circumvallation should have been completed along this stretch of coast.

The action was chaotic, with Caesar's troops in disarray (Caes. Civ. 3.69) but Pompey, perhaps fearing an ambush, failed to press home his advantage (Caes. Civ. 3.70). In the engagement Caesar lost nine hundred

and sixty legionaries, thirty officers, several knights and thirty-two standards. Pompey was saluted Imperator. (Caes. Civ. 3.71)

Following this costly engagement, Caesar changed strategy. He sent his baggage to Apollonia, and leaving two legions in his camp, and followed with the rest of the army. When Pompey heard of this retreat he set out after them. His cavalry caught some of Caesar's troops as they crossed the river Genusus (Shkumbin), killing a considerable number. Both sides stopped at their old camps at Asparagium (Caes. Civ. 3.76) but, in a ruse, Caesar quickly decamped that same afternoon and marched towards Apollonia. On the fourth day, Pompey abandoned the pursuit (Caes. Civ. 3.77).



The Roman agora at Apollonia

At Apollonia, Caesar left his wounded, paid his army, confirmed appointments and garrisoned the towns that had submitted, leaving four cohorts at Apollonia, one at Lissus, and three at Oricum. He then marched through Epirus and Acarnania (Caes. Civ. 3.78) and on into Thessaly.

Pompey advanced along the Via Egnatia through Candavia and into Macedonia (Caes. Civ. 3.79), and the two armies finally faced one another at Pharsalus in Thessaly.



A section of the Via Egnatia at Clodiana, modern Peqin, near ancient Asparagium.