The very early medieval period in the western Balkans is distinguished by the abandonment of several sites, the growth of defensive positions often occupied by elevated fortified sites, and by a transfer of populations to the coastal towns. This permanent, periodical or temporary transfer had a deep impact on both urban and rural settlements. Starting in the fifth century, but especially during the sixth century and later, towns and villages saw important transformations in their topography, their occupation patterns, and the composition of their inhabitants. Within this general framework of change, funerary patterns and space organisation saw major transformations as well; the influence of Christianity made itself felt.

For a number of years, excavations in the south of what was the province of Illyricum have brought to bear important new data on early medieval funerary occupation. In an area that cut across the boundaries of three imperial provinces of Illyricum, Epirus I and II and Prevalitaine, funerary archaeology has been privileged compared to that of other types of occupation (fig. 1). Nevertheless, these funerary spaces have not always been related to a specific site. This limitation has led to an understanding of the various aspects of the life of early medieval communities that remains partial. However, some initial considerations concerning the relation between the space of the living with that of the dead and the evolution of the funerary practices from late antiquity to the Middle Ages can be discussed.

One recent archaeological and anthropological project is focused on the study of the early medieval population of these provinces, in the territory corresponding to present-day Albania. This project takes into consideration the biological and social composition of the population,

the topographical relationship of the cemeteries with urban and rural sites, as well as the evolution of mortuary practices. This paper will focus on a number of coastal towns and their hinterlands, which are well documented and where the characteristics of this period can be traced. To date, however, the distinction between the urban and rural character of several sites remains rather vague.

Funerary space in the city

Starting from the fifth and during the sixth century, the main characteristic of funerary occupations is their gradual shifting, most evident in the coastal cities of Dyrrachium, Lissus and Buthrotum. The well-organised Roman cemeteries, situated far from the towns, were abandoned and replaced by new mortuary areas located much closer to the defensive walls. Only sporadically did some Roman cemeteries survive, such as in Lissus and partly in Buthrotum. In Lissus we find two rectangular stone-slab graves of the late sixth and seventh centuries integrated in the suburban Roman cemetery of the city. They contained Byzantine belt-buckles. West of Buthrotum, two graves of the sixth and seventh centuries, one containing a sixth-century belt buckle made of cloisonné and the other a U-shaped belt buckle, were found in the Roman cemetery of Mont Sotirë.

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2 E. Nallbani and L. Buchet have conducted this project since 2004 with the support of the CNRS Centre Orient et Méditérannée (UMR 8167), Centre d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Centre d’Études Préhistoire, Antiquité, Moyen Âge (UMR 6130), Nice, Sophia Antipolis and the Institute of Archaeology in Tirana.
3 See C. Praschniker and A. Schöber, Kërkime arkeologjike në Shqipëri dhe Mal të Zël, Archäologische Forschungen in Albanien und Montenegro (Tirana, 2003), pp. 21–23, fig. 29, 34.
5 Except the identification of the extension for the Roman cemetery, two Roman vaulted graves constructed with bricks have been excavated, see C. Praschniker and A. Schöber, Kërkime arkeologjike, p. 2.
7 L.M. Ugolini, *Albania antica 3...* p. 157; E. Nallbani, “Three Buckles from the Late