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Discovery of the First Theater at Stobi

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When Balduin Saria uncovered the marble theater at Stobi in 1924, he did not suspect that an earlier, very different theater lay beneath the well-preserved remains.¹ Since the auditorium and scene-building stood well above the contemporary ground level and there were no apparent anomalies to suggest a lower, earlier horizon of activity, Saria did not open any sizable probe below the floor of the building. Excavations in 1965 and 1966 directed by Saržo Saržovski for the Conservation Institute of Macedonia uncovered the remainder of the cavea and orchestra. At the time that work began again in 1970 as part of the Stobi Excavation Project directed by James Wiseman and Giorgio Mano-Zissi no remains of an earlier theater had been recognized.

The marble theater that had been exposed consisted of a simple, rectangular scene-building ornamented by a two storied *scaenae-frons*. Six porches supported the colonnade and five stairways led directly to the orchestra; there was no stage (Figs. 1, 2).² At either end of the colonnade curved bays joined shallow paraskenia to the façade. The high walls of the paraskenia are conspicuous today, and they played an important part in our discovery of the first theater. The *parodoi*, bordered by marble analemata (retaining walls) along the auditorium, were open to the sky and lay at an oblique angle to the scene-building. A high podium surrounded a large orchestra with an arc of 194 degrees and a diameter of 29.40 m. Figure 2 shows the orchestra in 1974.³ Small doorways at the lower ends of the *parodoi* gave access to radial corridors running inside the retaining walls. At the lower ends, the corridors finished in a short flight of steps that led to the top of the podium and the first rows of seats.

The west *parodos* and the west *paraskenion*, the east end of the east *parodos* and scene-building, and the eastern side of the cavea below the seat foundations remained unexcavated at the close of our project (Fig. 3). Rather than clearing the remainder of the building, our objective had been to document the stratigraphy in the scene-

1 B. Saria, "Das Theater von Stobi," *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 53 (1938): 81-148. Idem, *Požoriste u Stobima*. Vol. 1 of *Godisnjak Muzeja Juzne Srbije*. Skopje, 19a37.

2 The cavea faces the southeast, as seen in Figure 1, but for ease of description, it will be considered to face due south. All elevations refer to sea level.

3 The wall along the front of the scene-building that converted the orchestra to an arena in ca. A.D. 300 was removed after 1981.

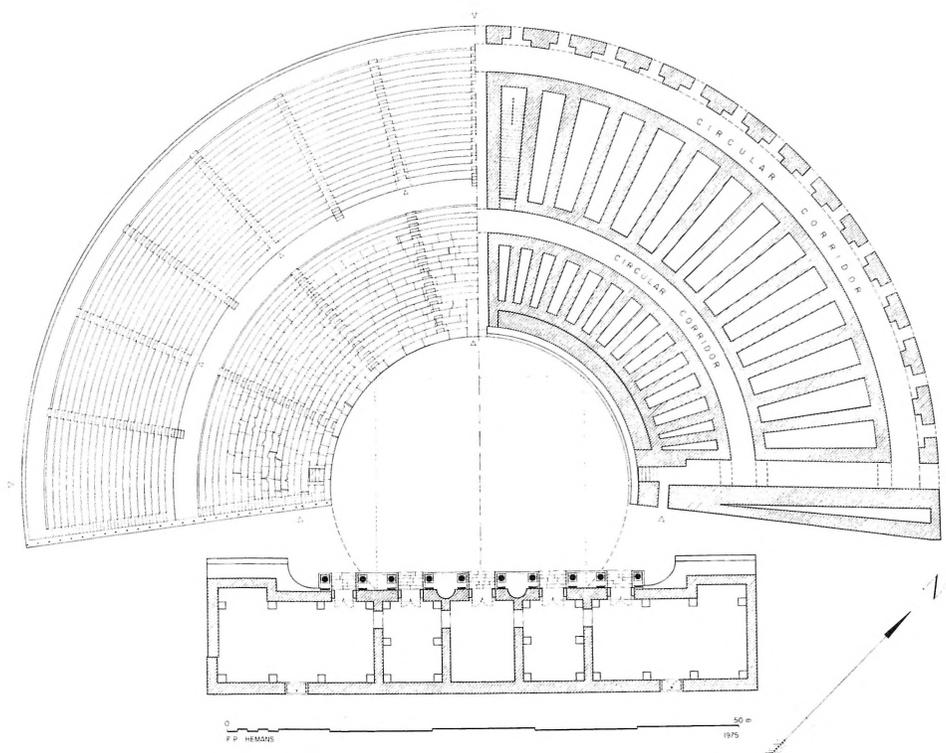


Fig. 1: Restored plan of the Marble Theater (F. Hemans, 1981)

building, orchestra and cavea, determine the chronology, and gather evidence for the design and construction methods used in the building. In 1998-2001 Vaska Kaleova of the National Conservation Center cleared the west parodos, and more recently (2009-10) Goce Pavlovski for the National Institution of Stobi excavated the eastern side of the scene-building and cavea below the seat foundations. I am grateful to the director, Silvana Blaževska, for permission to study the new material and to Goce Pavlovski for his help in all aspects of the work.

Discovery

Discovery of the first theater at Stobi occurred unexpectedly in the summer of 1973 when trench I was opened to explore the west end of the scene-building. In Figure 4, taken in 1974 looking north, trench I lies to the left and trench II to the right. The west paraskenion, unexcavated, appears at the top.

The first suggestion of an earlier building came from the inner face of the west wall of the scene-building where a rough, jagged surface interrupts the facing of the wall (Fig. 5).⁴ A second indication of change is a division in the masonry where a southern

⁴The rough patch occurs 5.70 m. from the south end of the wall.

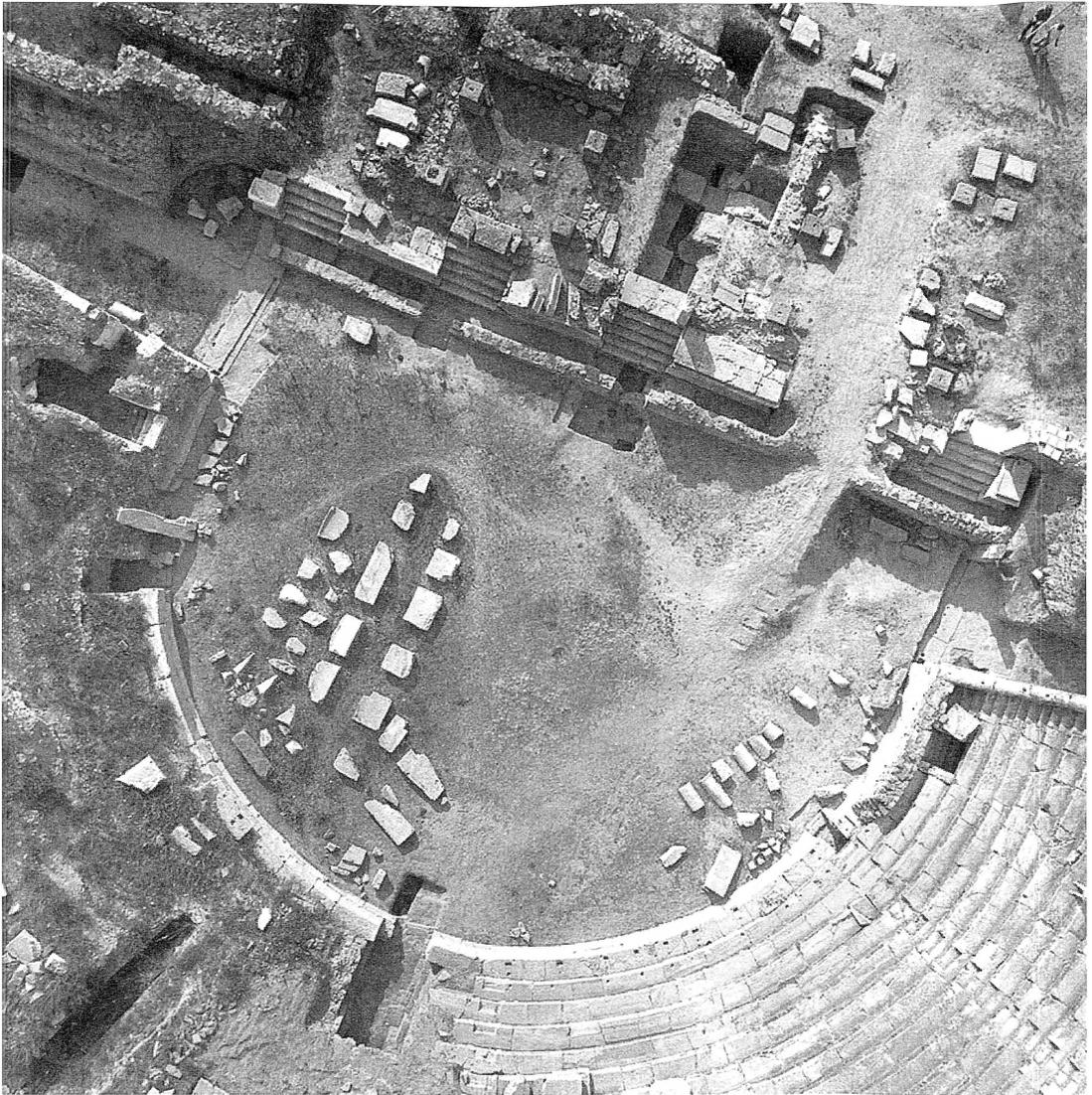


Fig. 2: Aerial view of the center of the theater

extension was added to the wall some time after the initial construction. Further excavation in trench I revealed that the west wall had originally formed a corner with a hitherto unknown wall running eastward, which is visible in the foreground of Figure 5. The two walls evidently formed the southwest corner of a large building. Later, the eastbound wall, labeled wall 1 in Figure 6, was demolished and the west wall, wall 2, remained standing and was extended to the south to join a new east-west wall, which is the rear wall of the marble scene-building (Figs. 1, 6). A hard-packed floor associated with walls 1 and 2 lay at a depth of 2 m. (elevation 137.50 m.) below the floor of the second building.⁵

At this point we realized that there had been an earlier structure on the site, some walls of which had been partially demolished while others had been incorporated into the marble theater. A probe farther north revealed the important information that at

⁵ Wall 1 is preserved to a height of 0.83 m. above a mortar construction floor; its foundation extends down a similar amount to virgin clay (el. 136.74).

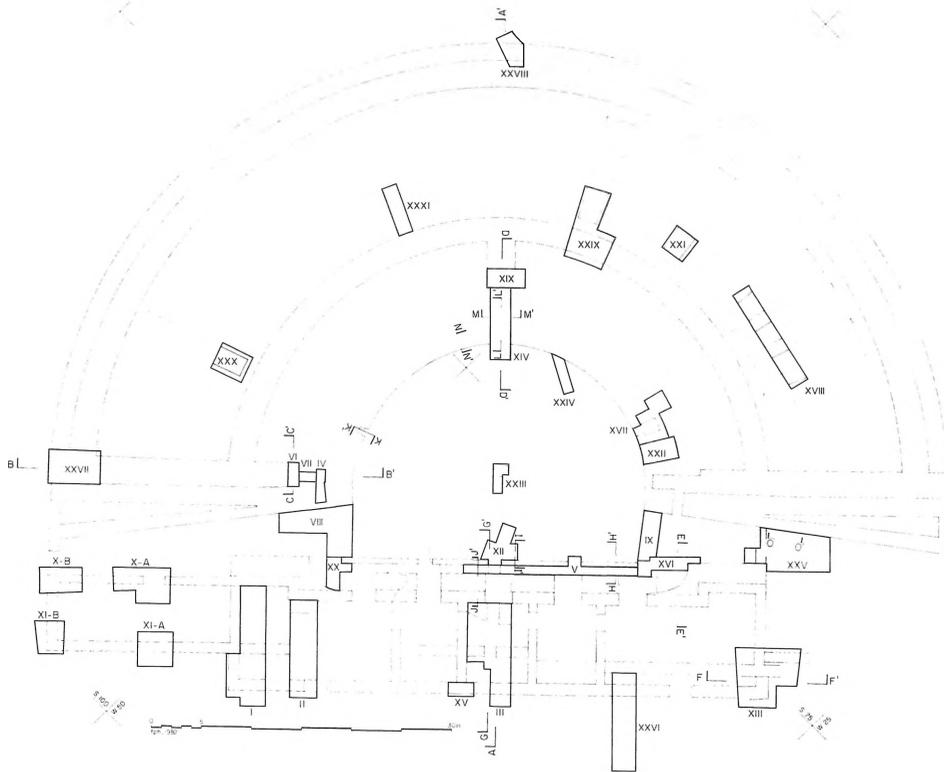


Fig. 3: Trench Plan (F. Hemans)

foundation level wall 2 was bonded with the well-preserved standing masonry that served as the west paraskenion of the marble theater. Thus, along with wall 2, it too had belonged to the first building. A similar construction stands at the east end of the scene-building. These high blocks of masonry are the largest portions of the early structure to survive above ground. At the rear (south) of the foundations stands a wall that served as the front of the scene-building in both the first and second phases, and it is labeled wall 3 in Figure 6.

To discover the plan of the early building and verify that it too had been a theater we examined all standing walls for signs of the rough and jagged surfaces that were left after a bonded wall was dismantled, as in the case of walls 1 and 2. Presumably when the rebuilding took place, the irregular surfaces were hidden by a coat of cement that in time dropped off. Fortunately, we were able to find a number of the uneven patches that provided clues to vanished walls. In exploratory trenches remains of these walls that had been buried below later floors were uncovered. Study of the standing masonry also revealed divisions in the masonry that pointed to two phases of construction. The fact that the architect of the second theater integrated elements of its predecessor in his design complicated the task of separating the two phases, and it raised the intriguing question, to be explored elsewhere, of the influence, if any, that the first theater had

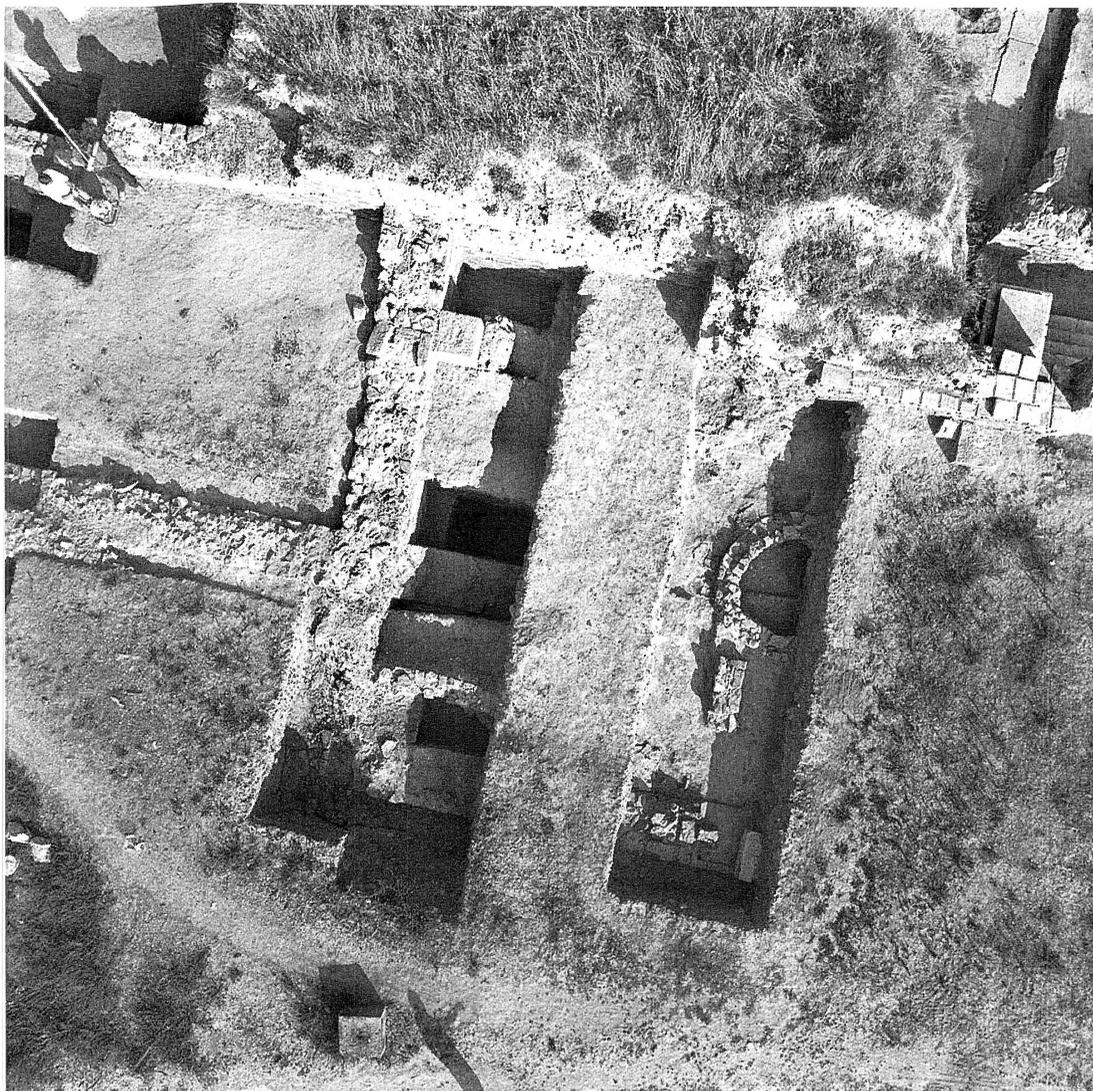


Fig. 4: Aerial view of Trenches I and II, looking north (1974) (74-169-16)

exerted on the second. The two theaters appear together in Figure 6 where the early walls are superimposed on the actual state plan and numbered 1-11.

Study of the first theater continued until the close of our excavations in 1981. Ceramics in construction deposits point to a date at the end of the first or beginning of the second century A.D., and demolition appears to have occurred soon afterwards. It remained unclear whether the theater had been completed, but there was enough information to draw a general plan of the building. The results appeared in preliminary reports.⁶ Yet, as long as certain areas remained unexcavated, the picture of the first theater was incomplete. In 2009, with the generous permission of the National Institution of Stobi I was able to study the newly exposed north side of the west paraskenion and the west parodos, as well as the east face of the east paraskenion and

⁶ E. Gebhard "The Theater at Stobi: A Summary," *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi*, eds. B. Aleksova and J. Wiseman, 3 (1981) 13-27; "The Scaenae-frons in the Theater at Stobi," *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi*, eds. B. Aleksova and J. Wiseman 3 (1981) 197-201. A full publication of the theater as known in 1981 is soon to be published, Gebhard, forthcoming.



Fig. 5: View of the corner between walls 1 and 2, looking west (1974) (74-152-6)

the lower end of the eastern radial corridor. Information from these areas supports the earlier reconstruction and extends to our understanding of the first theater and its history. Continued excavation as planned by the National Institution of Stobi will undoubtedly add more details to our knowledge of the early building.

Remains and plan of the first theater

Wall 1, uncovered in trenches I and III, was ca. 1.10 m. thick and built of mortared pieces of sandstone laid up in rough courses. Due to its position and length, it can be identified as the rear wall of the first scene-building.

Walls 2 and 4 belong to the ends of the building and are similar in construction to

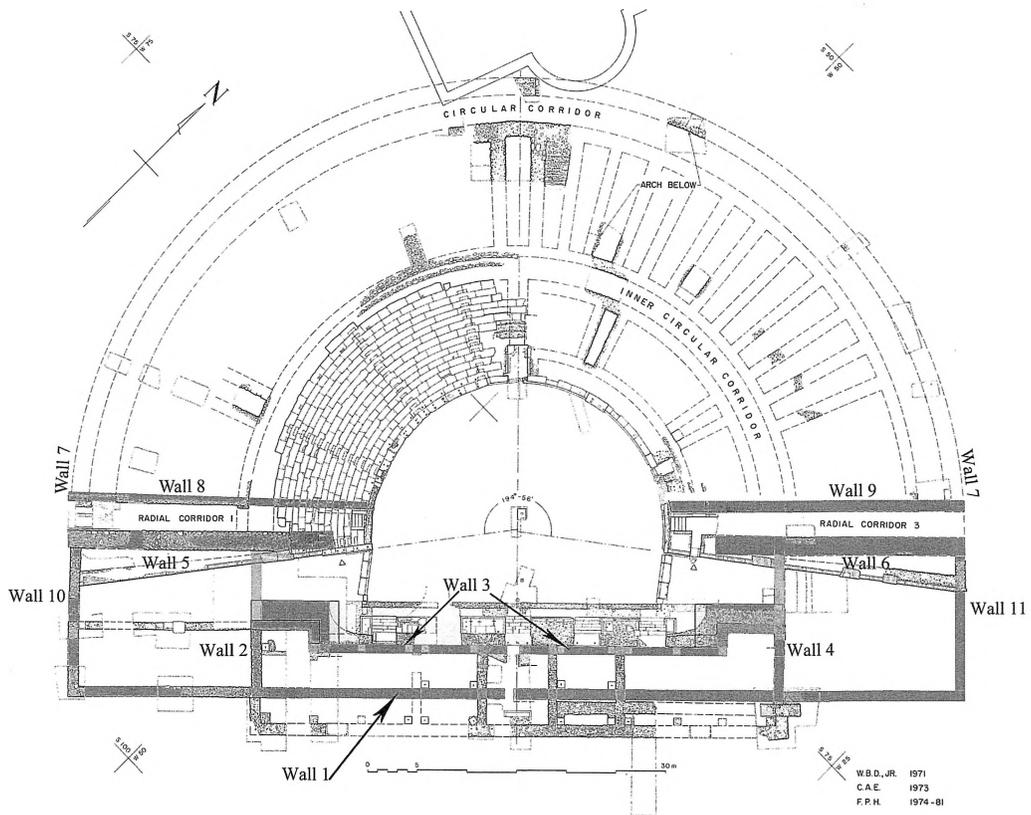


Fig. 6: Actual state plan with walls of the first theater numbered and outlined in dark grey. (10/2010; Peggy Sanders PDF)

wall 1. Wall 2 was bonded to the west end of wall 1, as described above. At the north end it joined the high foundation that supported wall 3, the front wall of the first and second scene-buildings (Fig. 6). On the north face of the high foundation a narrow strip of rough surface can be seen from the bottom to the top of the masonry, that shows where Wall 2 had been bonded to the foundation and later removed (Fig. 7). In the first theater, the wall had continued to the north and crossed the area occupied by the later parodos. On the east side of the building a similar rough surface can be seen on the east end of the high foundation where wall 4 had been removed (Fig. 8). In the east parodos trench XXV uncovered the lower section of wall 4. At ground level wall 4 is bonded to the high foundation of wall 3, as seen in the foreground of Figure 8. The north end of wall 4 continues under the marble analemma, which shows that, before construction of the marble analemma, it had joined an earlier wall lying farther north, wall 6, discussed below (Fig. 6).



Fig. 7: West end of west paraskenion, looking south with traces of bonding of wall 2 (2010) (DSC-0375)

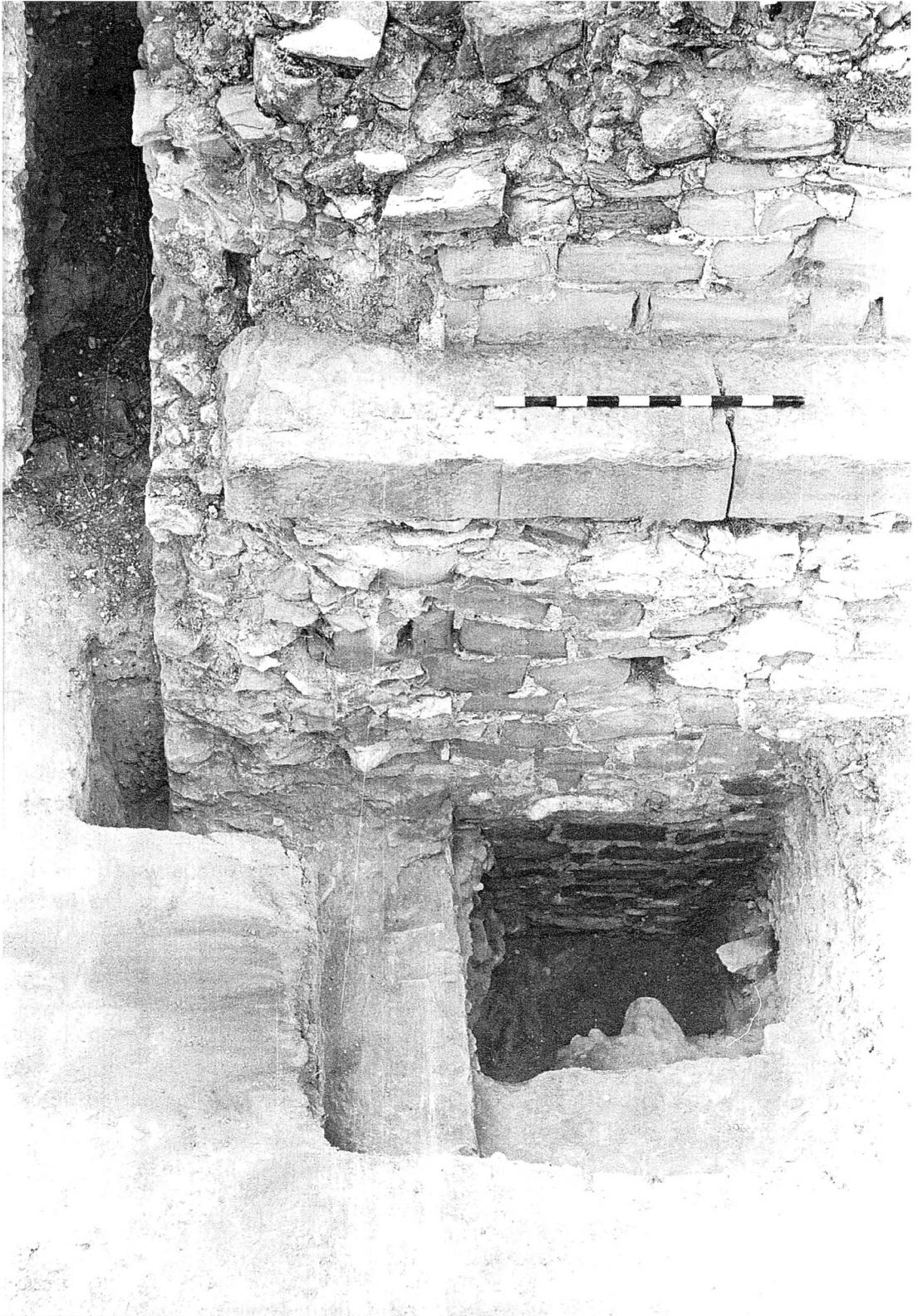


Fig. 8: East end of East Paraskenion (wall 3) and corner with wall 4, in Foreground (1981) (81-34a-6a)



Fig. 9: Trench III from above, looking north
75-90-43

Wall 3, the front wall of the first scene-building and retained in the second phase, is preserved at the west end, together with its high foundation; at the east end the wall was rebuilt at a later time after an earthquake.⁷

Before we consider wall 3 and the high foundations at either end, let us examine the concrete platform that lay between them. The carefully constructed foundation extends for 53.50 m. The fact that it is bonded with the foundation of wall 3 shows that it was part of the same construction, but the mass of masonry that it had supported, comparable in height to the foundations of wall 3, was later removed. The remaining portion rising slightly above ground level has been exposed in trenches in the center of the scene-building and along the front face.⁸ For the most part the foundation has a virtually level surface, as it appears

in section in Figure 10, taken through trench III in the center of the scene-building. Figure 9 gives a view of the same trench from above, looking north. The only unusual feature of the platform in the excavated section is a deviation in the line of the rear face at both sides a passage reserved in the center (Fig. 9). The foundation on the west side runs from the corner of the passage at an angle toward the northwest. On the east side of the passage, the rear face lies at an angle toward the northeast although the slope is less pronounced. Since the rear of the foundation was likely to have followed the shape of the masonry that had originally stood above it, the deviations at either side of the central passage gave us a clue to the type of façade that had been used in the first theater. The front wall apparently did not follow a straight line in the center, as its successor in the marble theater. It curved outwards towards the rear, forming a niche that framed the central doorway of the façade.

Such a design, composed of curved and rectilinear niches framing the doorways, is well-known from Italian theaters of the first century, and the design was later very popular in the western empire. Examples of the type are also found in the nearby

⁷ Earthquake in ca. A.D. 300. E.R. Gebhard, "Evidence for an earthquake in the Theatre of Stobi, c. AD 300," in *Archeoseismology*, eds. S. Stiros and R.E. Jones, *Fitch Occasional Paper 7*, British School at Athens, Oxford, 1996, pp. 55-61.

⁸ In trench XII at the center, V along the north edge, XVI at the east end, XXV in the east parodos, XX at the west end west end, XXXII in the west parodos; cf. Figures 3, 6. .

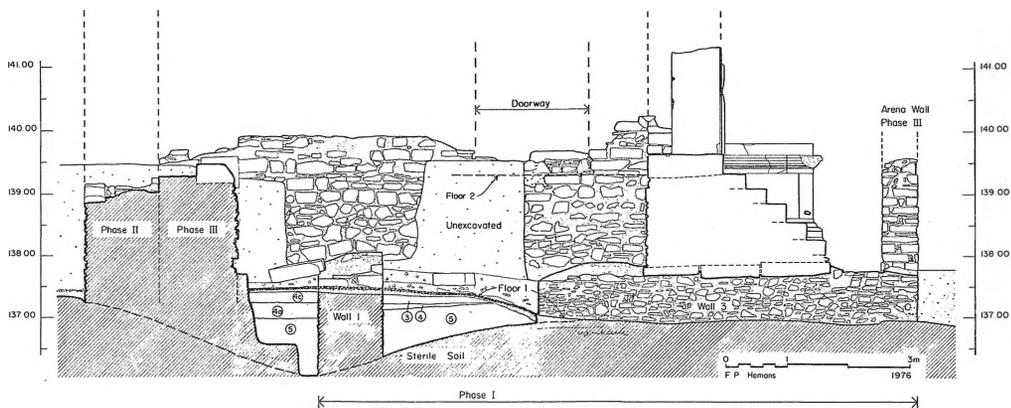


Fig. 10: Trench III, Section G-G, looking west.

theaters of Scupi and Salonae.⁹ The well-preserved example at Augusta Emerita (Merida) in Lusitania, Spain provided a model to guide our reconstruction in Figure 20.¹⁰ That type of *scaenae-frons* included a colonnade raised on porches along the front wall. Steps led from the doorways to a stage which was an essential element in Roman theater design. We had wondered at its absence in the marble theater. The first theater, if it followed the conventional pattern, must have had a stage. Thus, the entire façade would have been supported on a high foundation, which raised the porches and stairs to the level of the stage. When the plan was changed, the foundation was removed, leaving only its lowest portion as the concrete platform seen today. It was this major change in elevation as well as a new plan that required demolition of the first scene-building. At the ends of the building, however, the high foundation that supported the front wall was retained in the new building (Fig. 6).

We turned therefore to the high foundation that remained at either end of the building for clues to the first façade. Each block of masonry was about 12 m. high by 4.40 m. wide with an almost identical stepped profile (Figs. 11 west; 12 east; 13, section). Along the south side of the foundation stands the front wall, reused in the second scene-building.¹¹ Below the wall, the concrete projects ca. 1.50-1.55 m. and then drops down for ca. 1.26-1.30 m. to a ledge of green sandstone blocks.¹² The orchestra lay about 2 m. below the sandstone course.

On each end of the building the step and sandstone course make a return to the

⁹ Frank Sear, *Roman Theatres, An Architectural Study*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 256-57, pls. 220 (Salonae); 222 (Scupi) with references. Both buildings are dated in the 2nd century

¹⁰ Sear, p. 264, pl. 230. The *columnatio* may belong to a Flavian or Hadrianic remodeling

¹¹ The first wall is intact on the west paraskenion but rebuilt on the east. The west wall still stands to elevation 142.95, or 5.37 m. above the orchestra; on the east side to el. 142.12 m.

¹² ca. 0.27 m. high, 0.072 m. deep, with an exposed surface of ca. 54 m.



Fig. 11: West Paraskenion, looking southeast (2009) DSC 115



Fig. 12: East Paraskenion, looking southeast (1978) 78-98-13a

south along the inner face of the foundation there are signs, however, that the return had originally been wider and was later cut back. The change is most evident on the west side where recent excavation of the parodos exposed the northern face of the foundation. A clear division can be seen between the return of the step along the inner side of the foundation and the masonry to the east of it (Fig. 16). The step had obviously served some function in Phase I that was not continued in the later theater.

It had always been thought that the curved wall that extended from the final block of the green sandstone course to the end of the marble *scaenae-frons* was simply part of the design of the marble theater (Fig. 1). Conspicuous change in the masonry, however, can be detected between the curved wall and the high foundation (Figs. 14-16). When we looked at the foundation level exposed in trenches XVI on the east side and XXXII on the west.¹³ It became evident that the screen wall replaced the corner of the high foundation where it had turned to the south. It had obviously been added to cover the rough faces of the blocks and masonry where the return had been chiseled off (Figs. 1, 12, 14). The curved screen wall rested on the exposed section of the foundation where the upper part had been removed. It was not bonded (Fig. 15, east end). The curved walls were thus added in Phase II, to cover the junction between the sandstone return and the final porches of the marble façade.

The curious stepped profile of the high foundations with the prominent course of large sandstone blocks called for an explanation (Figs. 12, 14). As discussed above, the type of *scaenae-frons* would have been one that alternated curved and probably rectangular niches between porches. The porches would have stood at the same height as the stage. The sandstone course lying ca. 2 m. above the orchestra at either end attracted our attention since a similar course of green sandstone lay at the foot of the porches in the marble theater (seen in profile in Fig. 10, at the base of the eastern end porch in Figs. 12, 14). It seemed possible that the same taste for polychromy influenced the design of the first theater. If so, the masonry “step” above the sandstone course will have formed the core of a long porch at either end of the façade (Figs. 11, 12). Slabs of marble standing on the sandstone blocks would have revetted the outside, and above there would have been a crown course and stylobate for the columns, as shown on the restored drawings (Figs. 19, 20).¹⁴ The precise dimensions of the niches, doors and steps in the center must remain conjectural, but the façade will have been of this style.

On the west side recent excavations have added to our understanding of the junction between the two phases of the scene-building. A well-preserved section of wall 3 at the corner of the east-west portion and its return to the south appears in Figure 16. The east face of the return is seen at the back of Figure 17, and in front of it is a remnant of the same wall where it had resumed its east-west course. In the foreground is the front wall of the second theater in which bricks were used. It was built slightly farther to the north, toward the orchestra. A patch at left belongs to the second period. Figure

13 I am grateful to Goce Pavlovski and Jovan Radnjanski for excavating Trench XXXII in 2010 and to Jessica Gebhard for her assistance in recording.

14 I am greatly indebted to Fritz Hemans for his collaboration on the reconstruction of the first theater, the drawings and for much discussion about its form.

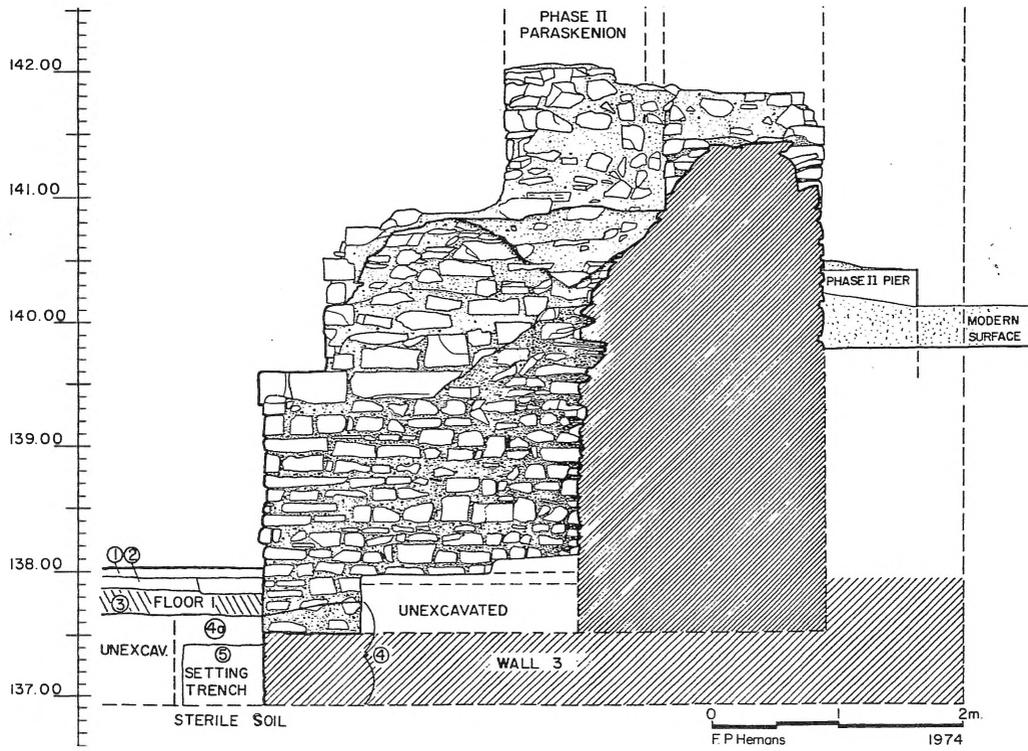


Fig. 13: Section E-E of East Paraskenion, actual state (F.Hemans)



Fig. 14: Curtain wall on East Paraskenion (1978) 78-98-14a

18, shows the south side of the same area before trench II was backfilled in 1974. The second wall stands to the right with its face well preserved. In the center are remains of the first wall at the corner between the north-south return and the main east-west section. Further excavation might enlarge the picture but the general outline of the changes between the first and second phases of the façade is clear. In summary: the portions of wall 3 preserved today at either end of the building had originally stood along the rear face of the two end porches, as restored in Figure 20. At the inner corners of the porches the wall had returned south toward the front of the building and then turned east-west along the façade (Fig. 6). When the plan was changed, most of the front wall was demolished; the returns of the end porches which had run along the sides of the final niche at either end were cut back since they could not be used in the new design. Screen walls were added to cover the rough masonry and curved inward to make a transition between the northern face of the former porches and the final porches of the new façade. The moving of the second front wall slightly to the north of wall 3 left the small remnant of the first wall that is seen in Figures 17 and 18, one further block may be added here. A massive slab of white marble recovered from the fill in trench III in the center of the scene-building belongs stratigraphically to phase I, and its size suggests that it was not moved far from its original location. The block, veined in grey, measures 3.05-3.076 m. by 1.60-1.68 m. by 0.44-0.455 m. Figure 21 shows it being lifted. It is larger than any block preserved in the marble theater and thus may have been discarded as unsuitable, yet re-cutting would have been an obvious solution. If it belonged to the first scene-building, the threshold of the center door is a possibility. There are no cuttings or other identifying marks. No other blocks can certainly be assigned to the first scene-building.

At completion of trench III the ground floor of the first scene-building was revealed. A doorway in the rear wall (wall 1) gave access to the building. The inside floor was composed of compacted soil, and a ramp led into a passage through the foundation to the orchestra.¹⁵ The section in Figure 10 shows the second phase of the building. In the early theater, however, the first floor of the scene-building would have been at least 2 m. above ground level, and a basement room would have lain below. What now appears as a low channel through the concrete foundation can be restored in the first phase as a corridor, ca. 1.10 m. wide and perhaps 2 m. high.

The stage

The green sandstone course that we have suggested lay at the base of the porches would have been at the level of the stage. If so, the stage would have been about 2.10 m. high above the orchestra, as restored in Figure 20. There will have been a stage wall crossing the orchestra, but it has not been excavated.

Versurae, parodoi and cavea

Let us return to walls 4 and 2 where they crossed the later parodoi (Fig. 6). At the north end of trench XXV in the east parodos, wall 4 continues beneath the marble analemma

¹⁵ The central passage, now only 0.75 m. high, would have had no function in relation to the basement of the second scene-building that was filled with soil.



Fig. 15: Detail 78-93-26

of the second theater. Although nothing more could be excavated, it seems likely that walls 2 and 4 belonged to rooms at the ends of the scene-building that Vitruvius calls *versurae* (V.6.3). Further evidence for such rooms is seen in the westward continuation of wall 1 where it formed the south wall of the west *versura* (Fig. 5). The rooms would have bordered the stage at either end, providing an additional door onto the stage and space for storage and other theatral needs, as restored in Figure 20. Further excavation is required before more can be said about them.

It is evident from the plan of the *versurae* that the parodoi of the first theater did not have the same orientation as those of the second. According to Roman practice they would have been vaulted, running under the seats and parallel to the scene-building. On close inspection of the auditorium, we found that there had indeed been such passages and they had been incorporated into the second theater as radial corridors



Fig. 16: West Paraskenion, separation between Wall 3 and Second Scene-building (2009) DSC 86



Fig. 17: South face of West Paraskenion, wall 3 at left; front wall of second scene-building at right. (2009) P309



Fig. 18: Foundation of Wall 3 uncovered in Trench II (1974)
74-152-44

(Figs. 1, 6). The marble retaining walls of Phase II, lying at an angle to the scene-building, had evidently been added to an existing construction. The division is clear in a view on the east side where the upper seats are no longer preserved (Fig. 22). The marble analemma is seen at left and the first analemma (wall 6) at right. In the later theater the vaulted passages no longer gave access to the orchestra but to the first rows of seats via a short flight of stairs leading up to the orchestra podium, as pictured in Figure 22. Thus, walls 6 and 9 on the east side and 5 and 8 on the west in the first theater were retaining walls for the parodoi. Those passages became corridors in the marble theater (Fig. 6). Goce Pavlovski in recent excavations on the east side of the cavea uncovered the stairs and marble revetment that had been added to the existing masonry at the end of the east parodos when the parodos was converted to a corridor that gave access to the cavea.¹⁶ He also exposed the west end of the original vault of the parodos. The same construction is found at the west side of the theater, but the seats above are intact and the cement added for conservation covers the original remains.¹⁷

A further question concerns the extent to which the first cavea was completed. At the east side of the *ima cavea* excavations in 2009 and 2010 have cleared a portion of the lowest annular wall that is bonded with wall 9 (Fig. 23). Thus, it appears that at least the foundations of the *ima cavea* were completed as well as the radial walls for the parodoi, but it is not certain that seats were built above the substructure.¹⁸

¹⁶ A full description and discussion will appear in Pavlovski's publication of the new excavations in the cavea. I am grateful to him for permission to include reference to it here.

¹⁷ Excavation in the western corridor revealed the massive foundations of walls 5 and 8. This material is discussed in detail in my book.

¹⁸ Further excavation within the cavea will undoubtedly yield evidence relating to the state of completion although the fragile condition of the masonry will complicate the investigation. The relation between form and function in the second theater is discussed in my book.

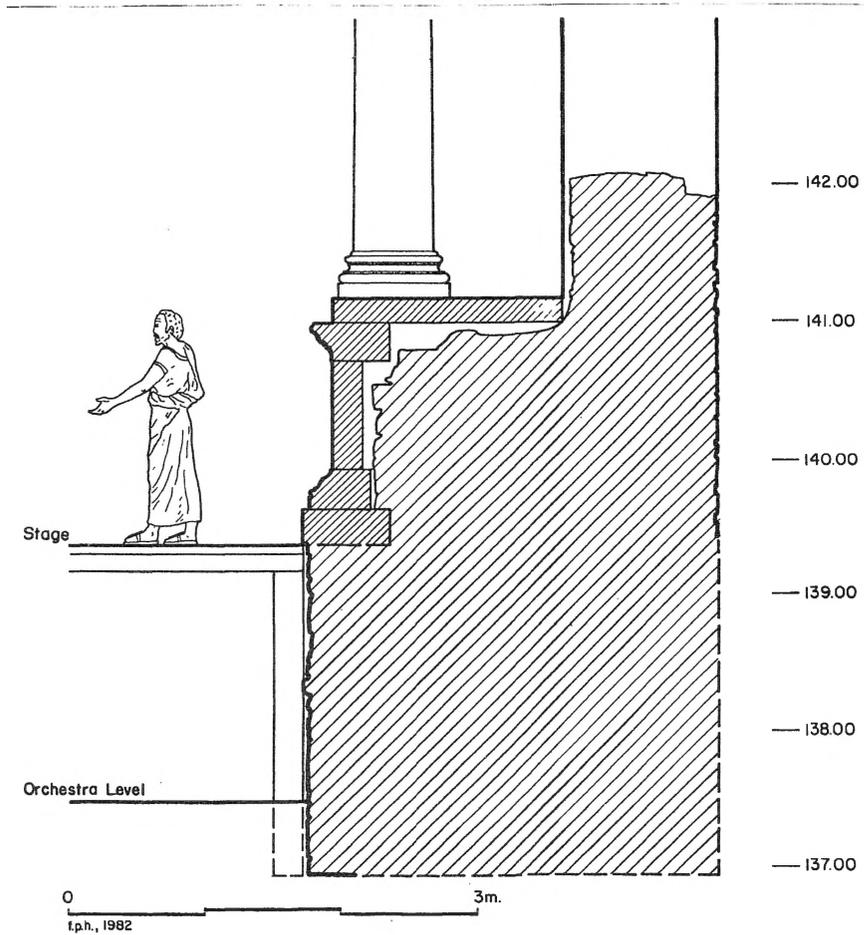


Fig. 19: East Paraskenion, Section E-E restored

The scene-building will have risen to at least the first story, but there too it is unclear whether it was completed.

The change of plan for the second phase involved a change in style as well as form. Indeed, it may have been a desire for a different type of building that prompted the rebuilding of the theater. The first theater was designed along Vitruvian norms for a Roman theater (V.6.1-6), while its successor was transformed into a building of mixed architectural forms that combined Greek and Roman features. To the large orchestra, open parodoi and lack of stage were added a raised podium and colonnaded *scaenae-frons* in way that finds parallels in theaters of Asia Minor. The reason for the change, which entailed extensive demolition and rebuilding of the scene-building, may also have stemmed from a change in the program of events that were held in the theater.

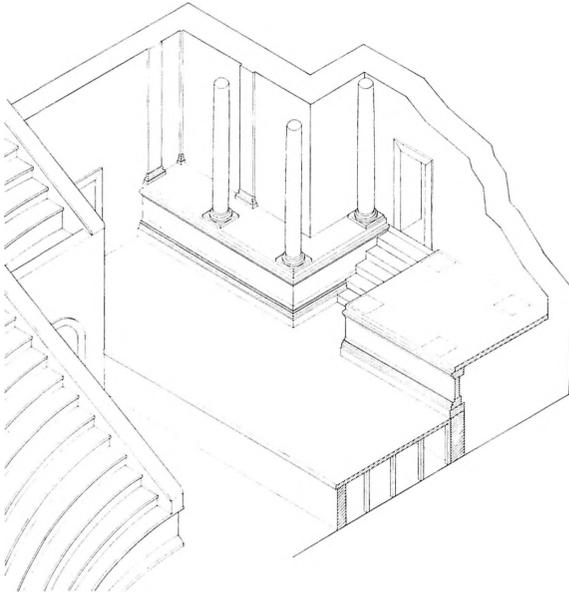


Fig. 20: Restored view of first scaenae-frons (F. Hemans)



Fig. 21: Lifting block from trench III



Fig. 22: Wall 9 and East analemma, looking west from above DSC 47



Fig. 23: Wall 9, from below looking east

Summary and conclusion:

As the brief description makes clear, the remains of the first theater at Stobi remain for the most part either buried under or built into the marble theater that succeeded it. Nevertheless, on the basis of the “ghosts” of walls that had been bonded to pieces of standing masonry and their buried remains it has been possible to restore the general features of the first theater. It conformed to the norms of a Roman theater of the first century, including a *scaenae-frons* composed of a curved central niche flanked by rectangular niches, a stage, small orchestra and vaulted *parodoi*. Large rooms (*versurae*) flanked the scene-building and stage, joining the scene – building to the *cavea*. At the present stage of our knowledge, it is difficult to see how far construction on the *cavea* had progressed before the plan was changed, but further excavation will undoubtedly expose more of the early building and answer some of the questions explored here.

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Резиме:

Откривањето на првиот театар во Стоби

Како што е воочливо од првичниот опис, остатоците од првиот театар во Стоби сеуште се во најголем дел покриени или соодани во мермерниот театар кој бил подоцна изграден. Како и да е, врз основа на “духовите” од сидовите кои биле врзани со делови од слободностоечко ѕидарство и нивните закопани остатоци, можно е да се реконструираат општите карактеристики на првиот театар. Истите одговараат на нормите на римскиот театар од I век, вклучително со *scenae-frons* составен од закривена централна ниша фланкирана со правоаголни ниши, сцена, мала оркестра и засводени пародоси. Големите соби (*versurae*) ја фланкирале сцената и ја поврзувале истата со кавеата. Според информациите што тековно ги имаме на располагање, тешко е да се воочи колку конструкцијата на кавеата била напредната пред градежниот план да биде променет; сепак, понатамошните ископувања секако ќе откријат поголем дел од оваа рана фаза и ќе одговорот на некои од прашањата кои се поставени во овој текст.

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