THE GALLO-ROMAN THEATRE AT SAINT-BERTRAND-DE-COMMINGES (HAUTE-GARONNE): AN INTERIM REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE PRESENT-DAY VISITOR to Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges cannot remain unimpressed by the visible ramparts and cathedral of the hilltop town. Upon approach, the eyes scan the northern flank of the *oppidum* and among modern structures and other monuments, a hillside theatre appears (Plate 1). It quickly becomes apparent that the theatre would have played a vital role in the visual linking of the lower town, a Gallo-Roman *civitas*, and the upper town, which remains enclosed by a set of mediaeval ramparts built onto Roman foundations. The theatre monument is sited along a privileged axis running through the lower town's temple altar and what is now the upper town's cathedral belfry, and while the two are temporally unrelated, archaeological remnants dating to antiquity have been uncovered at various altitudinal levels along this axis (Plate 2).

In terms of theatres, this as well as other Gallo-Roman examples are anomalies; that is, they do not precisely fit within the typical design schema of theatres in Italy and elsewhere in the Roman empire. Edmond Frézouls makes a good case for a revised typological definition for the theatres of Gaul, underscoring that, for instance, the "rural" theatre is not found outside of Gaul.[1] Builders adapted a variety of features to new functions that affected the diameter and links of the theatre to the urban ensemble. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the theatre at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges possesses within its design a host of traits that are unexpected.

This project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication and the Département de la Haute Garonne. The further logistical efforts of the Service Régional de l'Archéologie de Midi-Pyrénées were appreciated throughout the project's lifespan; in particular, the collaboration of C. Dieulafait and D. Schaad are noted. We are especially cognizant of the advice and assistance of J.-L. Schenck, Directeur du Musée départemental archéologique de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, and the topographic expertise and datasets of J.-L. Paillet, Architecte at the Institut de recherche sur l'architecture antique (CNRS—Aix-en-Provence). The dating and chronological conclusions, albeit provisional, are based on finds as catalogued and analyzed by G. Chamberland. The early photography of a greatly missed colleague, P. Armstrong, and the hand drawings of archaeological finds by G. Frommherz were crucial in the development of yearly reports. The detailed survey of the *Grande arche* (Plate 4) was done by R. Borghese and J. Coleman. We also remain grateful to the universities who facilitated student participation and especially the University of Ottawa for its financial support and its annual student cohorts. Finally, the comments of the two anonymous reviewers and the advice of M. George, an Associate Editor of *Phoenix*, facilitated a much clearer reading of the text.

[1] Frézouls 1989.

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Early archaeological work was undertaken within the vicinity of the theatre during the late 1920s and the early 1930s by local schoolmaster-turned-archaeologist, Bertrand Sapène.[2] His reports are the first attempts at understanding the architecture of the monument and contextualizing it within its urban setting. R. Lizop, in his *Histoire de deux cités gallo-romaines*,[3] echoes Sapène's reports and findings, as does A. Grenier in his *Manuel d'archéologie gallo-romaine*[4] and R. May in more recent publications.[5] Their diagrams and conclusions, however, are fragmentary and based on the incomplete interpretations of Sapène. No further archaeological work was undertaken on the theatre beyond Sapène's explorations.

New research on the site of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges was initiated in 1985 by international and multidisciplinary teams focusing on specific monuments and landscape themes, with the archaeology of the site (from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. and beyond) eloquently summarized by J. Guyon.[6] Other published reports relate to specific monuments and the complex topography; among others, J.-L. Paillet and C. Petit,[7] R. Sablayrolles and J.-L. Schenck,[8] and S. E. Cleary, M. Jones, and J. Wood[9] further outline the site's archaeological difficulties. A primary goal of the group is to examine the shifts in occupancy of the lower and upper towns between the classical and early mediaeval periods. At the topographical nexus of the two spaces, the theatre remains key to understanding the area's cultural changes. The present report aims to highlight preliminary results of research undertaken at the theatre between 1990 and 1999.

II. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

As alluded to in the introduction, the theatre is located along the north-south axis of the northern slope of the hill known as the *colline Saint-Bertrand.* Rock outcrops appear throughout the area and, for the most part, the limestone upon which portions of the theatre are built has not been systematically chiseled; masonry rests on the bedrock, with a bed of mortar leveling the initial courses. The remains include: an upper retaining wall, measuring over 80 metres in length (Plate 3-A); the *cavea*'s outer wall, with a diameter of approximately 71 metres (Plate 3-B); seating substructures (Plate 3-C); portions of upper central access corridors (Plate 3-D); fallen portions of the latter (Plate 3-E); portions of a lower corridor (Plate 3-F); portions of a *vomitorium* (Plate 3-G); and a substantial massif that would have formed part of the eastern *parodos* (Plate 3-H). The central *cunei*

[2] Sapène 1932.
[3] Lizop 1931.
[4] Grenier 1958: 808–814.
[5] May 1986: 391–393; May 1996.
[6] Guyon *et al.* 1991.
[7] Paillet and Petit 1992.
[8] Sablayrolles and Schenk 1994.
[9] Cleary, Jones, and Wood 1998.

of the *cavea* sit upon the substrate and the lateral extremities towards the eastern and western edges were probably supported in part on masonry substructures and superimposed arches. The eastern section of the *cavea* is partly intact with two archways still visible: one is a *vomitorium* and the other is the much larger *Grande arche*, to use Sapène's phrase (Plate 4); both were part of the lower entrances to the inner *cavea*. This eastern mortar-brick-cobble mass measures some 18.82 m in length, 4.45 m in varying width, and is preserved to a height of 11.70 m. It is constructed on wide foundations, partly filled in and partly held up by arches that have been altered more than once during the theatre's active lifespan. A wider arch can be retraced, hinting at the scale of the original entranceway (Plate 4-A). The *orchestra* and the *frons scaenae* have disappeared and their foundations, if remaining, are covered by a cluster of modern structures. Behind the presumed *frons scaenae* is a *porticus post scaenam*, completely hidden by agricultural activity.

III. EXCAVATIONS (1990–1999)

After a first season of exploratory work (1990), a series of strategically placed trenches and clearings was planned; precise locations were refined over time (Plate 5). The trenches were focused on four principal areas: the upper retaining wall located behind—yet linked to—the *cavea* (Plate 5-A), the *cavea*'s general vicinity (Plate 5-B and C), the well-preserved area above and below the lowest *maenianum* (Plate 5-B), and the *porticus post scaenam* (Plate 5-D, E and F).

The Upper Retaining Wall

The upper retaining wall does not form part of the theatre proper; it is linked to it, however, and in addition to operating as an earth-retaining wall it also works as a water run-off barrier and landscape backdrop to the theatre. The structure measures over 80 m in length, east to west, and is constructed of at least six rectilinear segments that are each oriented slightly differently; together, they form an approximate curve. Trenches were opened on both sides of the wall. The courses of the individual segments follow the slope of the hill; some are inclined up to 40 degrees along the slope. Small cobbles, set in a still robust mortar, are laid onto the substrate, with very little manipulation of the latter. A detailed study was undertaken, resulting in the discovery of a small cobbled drain and a more elaborate brick-constructed channel located to the east of the theatre's axis. The former seems designed for local drainage while the latter is larger and would appear to have drained a much wider area. This larger one is roughly oriented north-south and slopes downwards, surprisingly directing the water towards the *cavea*'s outer wall. A set of "buttresses" was also uncovered that, while at first appearing to support the retaining wall, were found to have been constructed independently of the wall; they may have formed a set of bases to support other structures.

The cavea

What remains of the outer wall of the *cavea* reveals a relatively rough masonry construction; some 68 m of that part of the monument still stand in varying states of preservation. The wall is up to 1.2 m thick and supports *vela*-mast posthole assemblies. Fourteen of what would probably have been seventeen postholes were located, along with their counter-mast sockets. Interestingly, these vary in terms of their dimensions, hole diameters, and distance from each other. Further, they are not oriented towards a common centre. These irregularities counter an earlier study in which the assemblies were shown as uniform architectural features.[10] Contrasting sharply with the roughness of some of the masonry construction of the rest of the wall, the socket assembly is well executed (Plate 6). Wooden posts rested in sockets integrated within the wall, piercing its outer face. Counter-sockets located on the inner side of the *cavea* wall permitted the installation of counter-masts to absorb some of the stress posed by the *vela*. The exterior of the outer wall also served to divert what seems to have been a significant quantity of water run-off from the upper slope.

The trenches and associated clearings of seating sections revealed key features. Although no seats *per se* remain in place, at least four rows of their substructures, made of squared cobbles and some brick, reveal features not normally encountered in similar theatres. First, the seats are slightly wider towards the centre of the *cavea*. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the seating of two design "moments" was uncovered; a second theatre was constructed over an initial one (Plate 7). This proved key in determining the construction methods and phases of the monument (see below, section IV). The seating substructures of the later theatre measure some 48.5 cm in height (with slight variations) and have a depth of approximately 64.5 cm; the height of the earlier seats would have been substantially less. Both phases of seating are constructed at an angle of between 34 and 39 degrees; the calculations are difficult, given the fragmentary evidence. The seating capacity is being calculated as part of the publication project.

Two large fallen sections of the upper western *cavea* were cleared. The most prominent is a massif belonging to the *media cavea*. It was partly supported by the rock making up the hill and partly by masonry substructures. The section in fact is at the area where substructures connected with the rock, and, although not in its original placement, it is well preserved and provides an example of the way the access corridor to this middle level of the theatre was built. Detailed study of the fallen section and its corresponding points that remain in place thus revealed construction details. First, the bedrock underneath the walkway was slightly incised, then mortar was used to level the now missing floor covering; onto the mortar were placed larger slabs which made up the flooring. The key point is that the section which remains in place is part of a corridor that would

[10] Graefe 1979: 41–43, pl. 40–43.

have served to grant access to at least the upper *praecinctio*. Main entrances to the theatre would thus have been located at a mid-level point along the hill.

Once the access corridor reaches the central *cuneus*, it turns sharply towards the centre of the theatre and opens to a stairway presumably leading to the upper and lower reaches of the *cavea*. The access corridor runs at least 2.20 m in length towards the centre and is 1.52 m in width. A set of stairs, which must have existed, has disappeared.

The Lower maenianum

In the well-preserved eastern area, the link between a *vomitorium* and the lower *cavea* was clearly recognizable. The *vomitorium*'s barrel vault measures over 8 m in length, is 2.2 m wide and 3.2 m in height, and its ceiling slopes downwards (1:7) as it heads out of the theatre proper. No stairs were located, although a drop of at least 0.65 m was recorded to the immediate exterior of the passage. The *vomitorium*'s masonry is arranged in horizontal courses of *moellons* set in a lime mortar and resting on the superficially chiselled bedrock. The flooring was probably made up of large slabs of marble; traces of a mortar levelling bed were found where the *vomitorium* opens into the *cavea* space. In this same area, a vaulted and curved passageway is oriented towards the centre of the theatre. Still within the vicinity of the *parodos*, below the prominent *Grande arche*, the clearing of masonry and unearthing of foundations revealed differences in construction which correspond to at least two building phases (see below, section IV). The remains of a foundation level and several cobbles arranged on a slant hint that at least one more arch, some 3.6 m wide, stood to the north of the *Grande arche*. No evidence relating to the *pulpitum* or *scaenae frons* was uncovered, although a portion of a line of large white limestone blocks parallelling what would have been the position of the *pulpitum* was surveyed. This line of blocs will be key in determining the extent of the inner *cavea*, *orchestra*, *praecinctio*, and perhaps the *scaena frons*.

The porticus post scaenam

Trenches within the *porticus post scaenam* outlined a space directly linking the theatre to the monumental centre of the town. The *porticus post scaenam* is expansive, measuring approximately 102 m north-south and 74 m east-west, including its outer walls. A double-walled arrangement delineated the space; a wider inner foundation wall and a somewhat narrower outer foundation wall were located throughout the perimeter of the area. Between the walls, the walkway was raised beyond the level of the inner *platea*. Along the western side, approximately halfway along the wall, foundations for what would have been a large platform—probably an entrance—were also uncovered. A similar arrangement is postulated for the eastern elevation. At the north end, no clear entry point was found. At the north-western corner of the space is a well preserved drain, oriented diagonally towards the centre of the *porticus post scaenam*. The drain slopes away from the

centre and its dimensions (0.48 x 0.61 m) suggest a substantial water evacuation arrangement.

IV. ARCHITECTURE AND TECTONICS

This section has three objectives. The first focuses on the construction methods and structural features of the theatre; the second aims at understanding the *porticus post scaenam* and identifying the links between it and the theatre; the third considers the role of the theatre within the town plan and the overall urban ensemble. What follows are some general conclusions regarding the monument's architecture.

As noted in section II (above, 318–319), the theatre is built partly on masonry substructures and corresponding superimposed arches. This is especially clear from the study of the *Grande arche*, its adjoining foundations to the north and the linked matrix of cobbles, brick, and tufa blocks to the south. Two distinct construction phases corresponding to the hypothesis we proposed earlier (in Guyon *et al.* 1991) were confirmed. In an early theatre, a series of arches was constructed of relatively even courses of cobbles and white lime mortar; the mortar is distinct and offers a visual confirmation of this early state. In a second phase, the width of the arches was reduced and they were strengthened by the addition of new brick and cobble courses; the brick, which was used to level and tie the construction assemblies together, is the defining characteristic of this phase. These alterations may have been brought on by a weakened state, but it is more probable that they were necessitated by a substantial re-design of the *cavea* that called for a strengthened set of structural supports.

In the second phase, the seats were altered substantially. Small portions of the seating substructure of the first theatre were discovered in the eastern section of the lower *cavea* as well as (less discernibly) in the area near the fallen section of the access corridor of the *media cavea*. In spite of the limitations imposed by the lack of positive points from which to take precise measurements, it was possible to make hypothetical circular tracings which delineated the approximate limits of both first and second theatre phases; the results indicate that they do not share a common centre (Plate 7). The reconstruction sequence of seats is as follows. The seats of the first theatre were removed and a layer of crushed and compacted stone was laid over the initial substructures. The negative of this construction methodology is observable from a robbed section within a modern building abutting the mass. Onto this layer, new marble seating slabs were installed, although it is probable that some of the slabs from the first phase were re-used within the second design. The slabs vary in dimension, from 1.35 to 1.60 m in width and 0.65 to 0.75 m in depth; their thickness is fragile, at 0.11 to 0.17 m. They were clearly re-worked when the initial theatre was transformed. Examples of the latter were uncovered, in their relatively recent fallen state, along the vaulted corridor located between the two lower *maeniana*.

The second theatre would have certainly augmented the seating capacity; its perimeter and *cavea* height were increased by adding courses throughout the top levels of the understorey. The added weight consequently necessitated a strengthening of all lower archways, including the *Grande arche*. While the peripheral wall of the first *cavea* is not readily discernible because it was completely re-covered by second-phase masonry, hints of it were recorded in the lower levels. Due to the substantial degradation of the second phase and the almost complete transformation and re-working of the initial theatre, dating is based on sparse evidence. If we rely on the sole shard of *terra sigillata* that was found, the first theatre dates to the end of the first century B.C. or early first century A.D. This evidence is indeed scanty, but because more abundant finds (in the form of locally produced ceramics, for example) date the second theatre to the mid-first century A.D., the early first-century A.D. date for the first theatre seems reasonable.

The *porticus post scaenam* appears to have been built at the same time as the second theatre. A full section of the lower town's inhabited area, including roadways, was razed for its construction. Finds suggest a mid-first-century A.D. construction date, clearly corresponding with the second theatre. Its walls are built upon substantial foundations; the outer one is presumably load-bearing and supported a full-height enclosing wall, while the inner one probably corresponds to columnar supports. The foundations and two access points are certain, although the points at which the space meets the theatre were not clarified. To the west the modern road leading to the *ville haute* now covers any possible connecting link, and to the east present-day buildings cover any possible remaining clues. The extent of the *porticus post scaenam* and its placement within the urban scheme point to a certain interplay between it, the theatre, and the central *civitas*.

The positioning of the theatre along a central and key axis suggests a strong urban landscape plan, one that seems to focus on a scenography inherited from the Roman settlement's initial plan. The northern face of the upper hill, the retaining wall sited above the theatre, the exterior wall of the *cavea*, the theatre proper, and ultimately the *porticus post scaenam* together formed what would have been a visually prominent and physically dominant landscape. This notion is based on the presence of the expansive north-south sited *porticus post scaenam* which extends along the front of the theatre. It is also supported by the frontality generated by the theatre as sited beneath the retaining wall in the near background, and the almost perfectly aligned east-west face of the hill in the far upper background. The whole suggests a well-planned monumental centre, forming a coherent urban ensemble that rivals most other important centres of Gaul.[11] The theatre is the central monument in a landscape of power that speaks to the importance of the place; together, the frontality and axiality of the monument's siting, along with its scale, suggest a key regional meeting place. The urban questions are not entirely solved, however. The contrast, for example, between the regularly planned

[11] Consider, for example, the theatres at Lyon and Vienne, among others.

porticus post scaenam and the highly irregular plan of the town's centre remains problematic; this seemingly contradictory placement of a strong geometric space and a somewhat less organized one remains unexplained.

V. CONCLUSION

The theatre at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges is neither the largest nor the smallest of the two hundred or so Gallo-Roman examples. At approximately 71 m in diameter, its outer *cavea* compares roughly with that at Compierre at 73.50 m; it differs substantially, however, from the theatre at Arleuf, whose *cavea* diameter measures 44.35 m, and from that at Mandeure, which has an even larger *cavea* diameter of some 142 m. With almost nothing remaining of the *scaena*, our example is also not the most monumental or ornately decorated; the theatres at Orange, Lyon, and Vienne, for instance, tower over it in comparison, and were integrated into complex iconographic programs.[12] The size or decor, then, are not what make this particular theatre significant. The monument is important for reasons that lie beyond the details of its construction, the particulars of its design, and the circumstances of its immediate topography. These features are significant, but the most striking aspect is the intent to enlarge it considerably in the mid-first century A.D., and the degree of its integration into the urban and topographical context. While it would appear from our analysis that it was enlarged to rectify a weakened structural state rather than to increase seating capacity, its importance in the urban context outweighs the importance of its general architectural features.

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[12] Bieber 1961; Landes 1989.

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Plate 1. General view of the theatre (existing conditions)

Cleared from brush and debris, the theatre's outline and remaining architectural details appear. Note the *vela* post sockets (lower right), the *Grande arche* (mid-left) and modern structure atop what would have been the *orchestra* (lower left).

Plate 2. Theatre location in relation to other monuments

The modern road that allows access to the upper town cuts through the primary axis of the town of antiquity and the theatre and *porticus post scaenum* (the road is lightly hatched). The center of the circle passing through the two main doors of the upper town, the *portes* Majou and Cabirole (the larger circle), and the center of the circle bisected by the southern rampart wall (the smaller circle), both lay along the main axis of the theatre and *porticus post scaenum*.

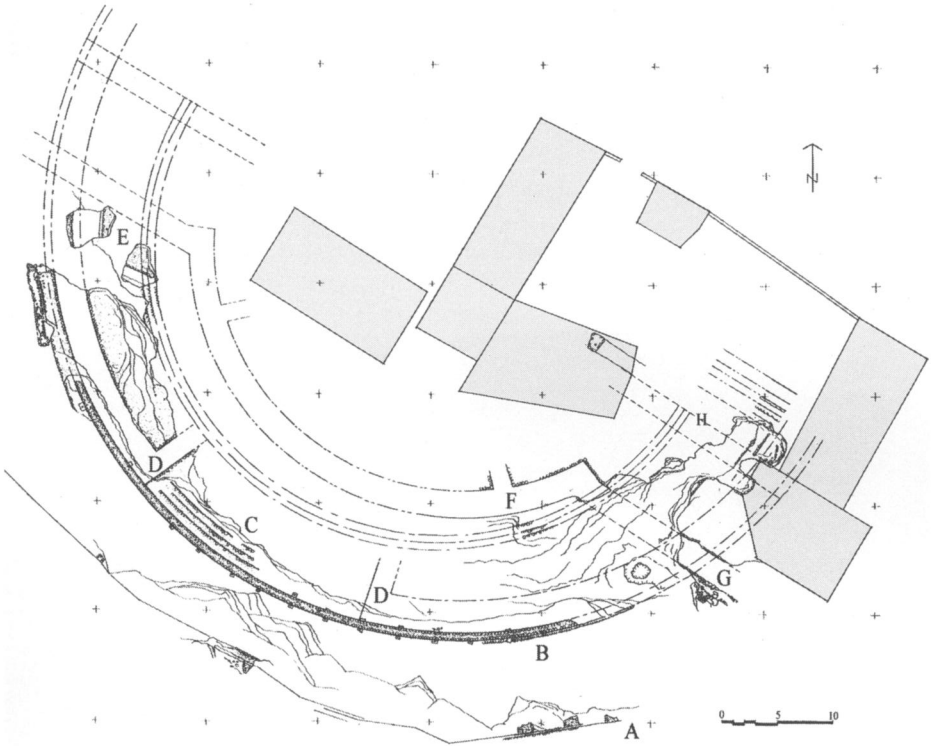

Plate 3. Theatre remains

There remain significant portions of the theatre. These correspond to the letters on the diagram: A: an upper retaining wall; B: the *cavea*'s outer wall; C: seating substructures; D: upper central access corridors; E: fallen portions of the latter; F: lower corridor; G: *vomitorium*; H: massif forming part of the eastern *parodos*. The shaded areas correspond to modern structures.

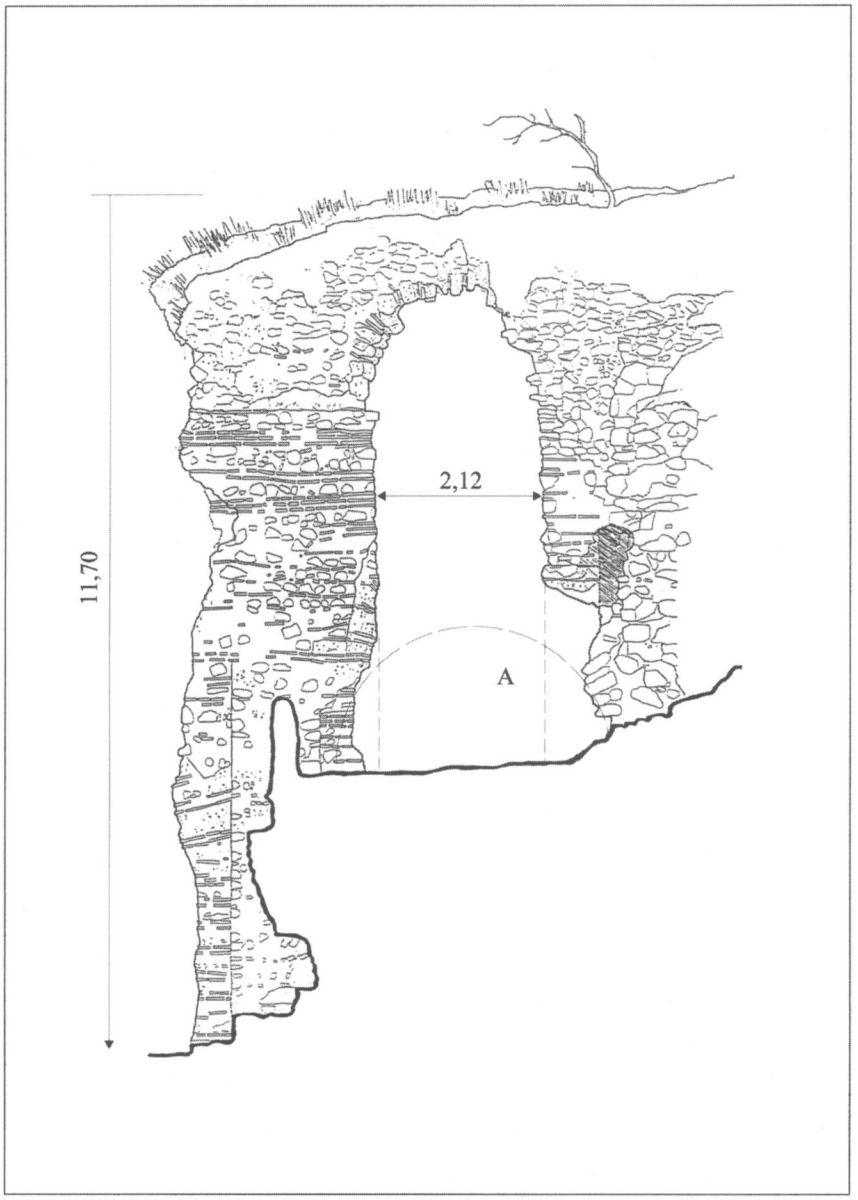

Plate 4. The *Grande arche*

At well over eleven metres in height, the imposing massif remains as a testament to the theatre's dominion over the local landscape. The second theatre, built onto an initial one, is still extant. The projected arch signified by an "A" belongs to the initial theatre, which was probably strengthened by reducing the width of passages.

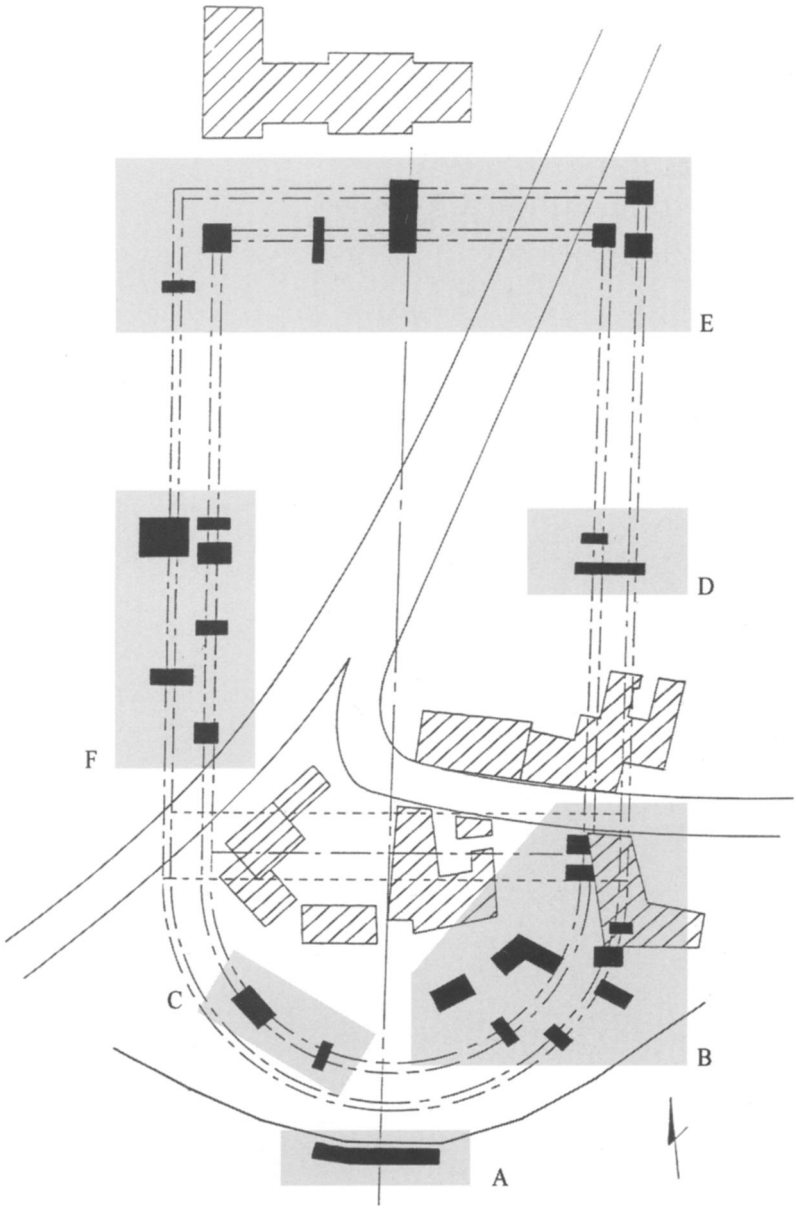

Plate 5. Trench locations

A: upper retaining wall; B: *cavea* east; C: *cavea* west; D: *porticus post scaenum* east; E: p*orticus post scaenum* north; F: *porticus post scaenum* west. The hatched areas correspond to modern structures.

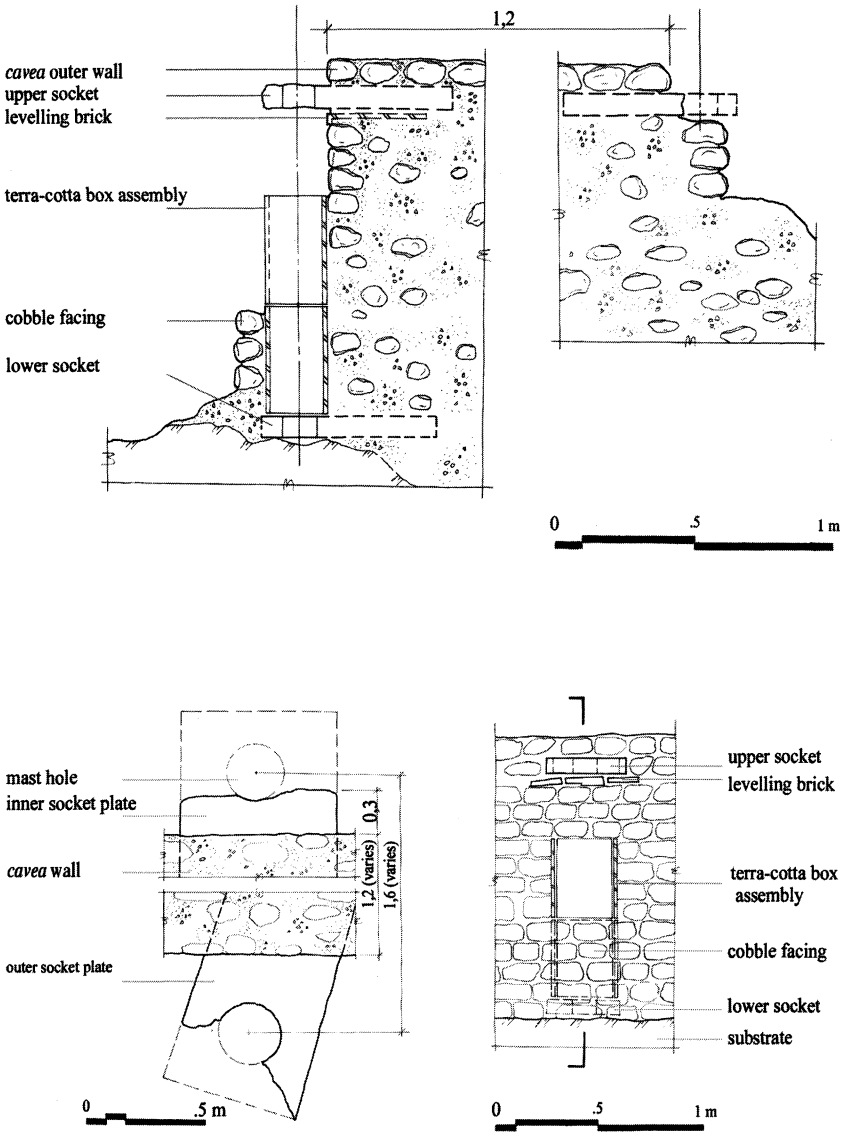

Plate 6. *Vela* post socket assembly details

The upper drawing is a cross-section of the assembly: on the exterior side of the *cavea* wall, there is an upper socket through which a wooden post would have been inserted. A lower socket would have served as anchoring point for the same post. To prevent obstructions from the holes, a terra-cotta box was constructed. The lower right drawing outlines a typical socket arrangement; note the asymmetrical construction. The lower left drawing shows the assembly in elevation.

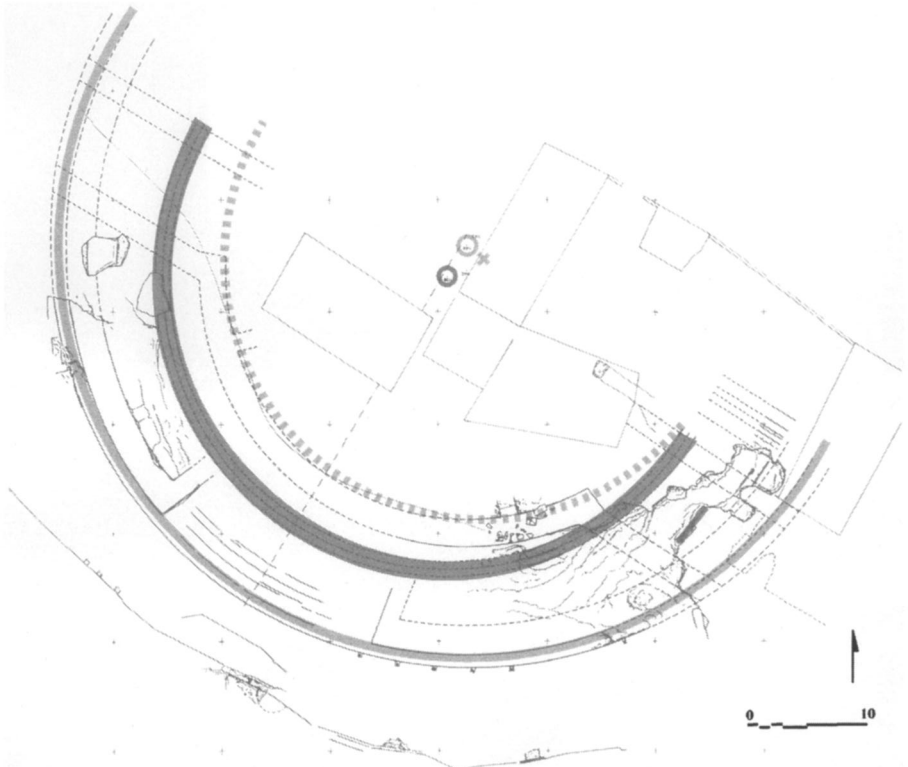

Plate 7. Hypothetical theatre centers

The darker radius and center point correspond to an earlier, initial theatre. The lighter curve and center point correspond to a newer theatre. The light, hatched curve corresponds to the lower access corridor of the more recent theatre.