

THE DIG

UNEARTHING THE ANCIENT PAPHOS THEATRE



THE SETTING

In the later years of the fourth century BC the last of the Cypriot kings, Nikokles, founded *Nea Paphos* (New Paphos) in what is now called *Kato Paphos* (Lower Paphos).

It was centred around a good harbour and was protected by cliffs on at least two of its other three sides. As we can see from finds of high quality pottery imported from Athens during the sixth, fifth and the earlier part of the fourth centuries, the site of the future town had not been uninhabited.

In the years following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, his successors struggled for dominance in the new, enlarged Greek world that he had created. The Ptolemies of Alexandria in Egypt achieved considerable maritime power in the eastern Mediterranean and took control of Cyprus to secure their trade routes. *Nea Paphos*

was a key port for them, in part as a consequence of the natural sea currents and prevailing wind-patterns, which worked conveniently for the route to and from Alexandria. Certainly from the second century BC, but quite possibly from the start, they made it the capital of the island. It remained so until the later part of the fourth century AD.

As an element of the urbanisation of Paphos, it was given a theatre. As in so many cities of the ancient world, this was located towards the edge of town, in this case in the north-east corner near one of the main gates. It was built against the southern face of a low hill, known since the Middle Ages as *Fabrika*, and positioned so that those sitting in the auditorium were able to look across the town in the direction of the harbour and beyond.

Introductory text edited from:

Richard Green, Craig Barker and Smadar Gabrieli, *Fabrika: An Ancient Theatre of Paphos*, Moufflon Publications Ltd., Cyprus, 2004 (publishing@moufflon.com.cy)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREEK DRAMA

Scripted theatre (plays as we understand them) was an invention that can be tied to a specific time and place. It was developed in Athens in the last years of the sixth century BC, in the years of the new democracy. It grew in sophistication extraordinarily rapidly - the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and the comic writer Aristophanes were all working in the first hundred years of its existence. Such a development implies a keen interest and involvement on the part of that other major component of the theatrical experience, the audience. It was this response and enthusiasm that generated theatre's development. As theatre spread through the ancient world, this link with the people was maintained and even strengthened as theatre

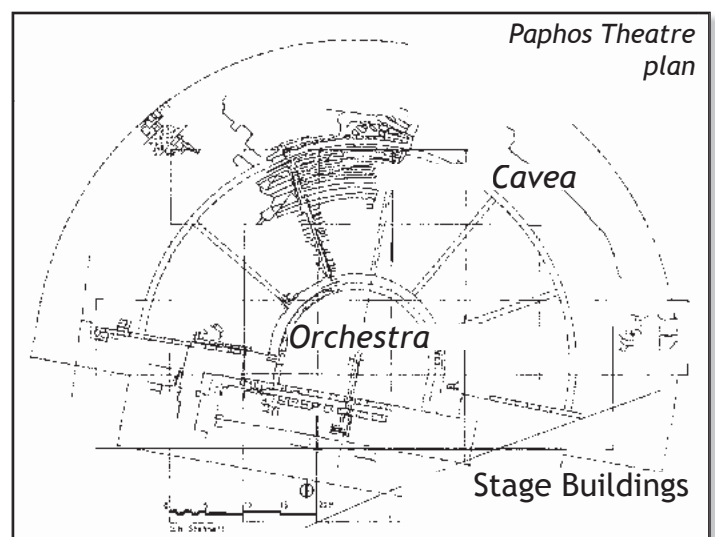
became a reference point in popular culture. The key figures and situations of Greek drama became recognised points of comparison for one's own problems. As the Greek world itself spread into new territories, theatre became an identifier of Greek culture, something that distinguished Greeks from foreigners. When Alexander rested his troops in Tyre in present-day Lebanon, before taking his expedition further east, he organised a drama festival for them. We are told that Greece's most famous actors were brought across to perform. We can be sure that he did all this not only to entertain his troops, but as a bonding process for them, as a reinforcement of their identity and ethnicity in a foreign world.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREEK THEATRES

Early theatres, of the fifth century BC, were simple affairs with a straight edge of seating opposite the stage and flanking seats extending around the sides of the roughly rectangular space in the middle. This space was known as the *orchestra* since it was the area where the chorus, which was such an important element in early drama, sang and danced.

The actors in this phase performed both in the *orchestra* and on a stage which was less than a metre high, enough to make them visible but not so high as to be out of touch with the chorus. Communication between these areas was by a simple staircase set in the middle. To be effective, any open-air stage had to have a background against which the actors would be visible and distinct. This background or stage-building had at least one door leading into it from the stage, and very soon three. At a practical level this building served as a changing room (important for a kind of drama in which there was a very limited number of actors), but it also served in dramatic terms as representing a world beyond the place of the visible action, for example in tragedy as a palace from which royal figures would emerge. At this point the construction was normally of wood.

During the course of the fourth century, although the stairway communicating with the *orchestra* was retained, the stage was made a little higher, perhaps 1.6 m. The intention must have been to make the actors more visible, perhaps because audiences were increasing, perhaps because the actors were seen to be taking on a more and



more important role relative to the chorus. Some theatres, notably that in Athens but also that in the major city of Syracuse, came to have the stage-building made of stone, with a facade of semi-columns.

A third change, a major one, was to have the *orchestra* laid out in the form of a circle and in many cases to have it surrounded by seating for some two thirds of its circumference. This is the classic form of the Greek theatre as we know it from the standard literature. The driving force in this change, which happened in the half-century immediately prior to the construction of the Paphos theatre, was a vast increase in the number of people wanting to attend the theatre, which went hand in hand with the development of a star system for actors who, according to reports, became more important in the eyes of the audience than the writers or even the plays themselves. They were able to command huge appearance fees, at least in the main centres.

HOW WAS THE PAPHOS THEATRE USED?

It is not easy, in the absence of definitive records, to answer the question of what sorts of performances were staged during the life of the theatre.

What was popular must have changed enormously through time. In the earlier years, such a theatre would have craved the sorts of dramas staged in other centres across the Greek world. This would certainly have included works of Euripides, whose work had achieved classic status already during the fourth century BC. There were, however, many contemporary writers, often derivative of Euripides in their style and subject matter, who were popular enough in their day even if their work has not survived for us. Another feature of contemporary theatre was the star status of the leading actors. This found its expression on stage in the growing popularity of extracts from famous plays, familiar passages played amatively, much as we experience passages from Shakespeare or well-known arias from opera sung by famous tenors.

We have evidence from Cyprus in general of the popularity of fourth- and third-century comedy, in the form of clay figurines of actors and their masks.

The major figure at the time of the theatre's foundation was Menander, whose comedies revolutionised the genre. His work was refined

but at the same time reached a wide audience. His plays were about family situations, often revolving around a young man winning his girl despite all manner of difficulties. A happy ending was almost inevitable (except, of course, for the villains of the piece). The spectators must have felt that they were witnessing events they could recognise and even relate to.

By the earlier part of the Roman Empire, other forms of entertainment were also becoming popular. Musical items were doubtless to be found at all times, but they came to take a more important role in the Roman period.

Another genre which took an ever more important place was that of 'pantomime', in which a single actor played a series of roles (changing his mask appropriately), not speaking or singing, but miming to the sound of music.

At the same time we know from literature and from ancient depictions that performances by jugglers and acrobats took up a substantial part of the programme, and then there were introduced gladiatorial combats and animal hunts. From the mid-third century AD the *orchestra* at the Paphos Theatre could be used as a water basin for spectacles of various kinds, whether we think of battles with crocodiles, or mock naval battles, or water-ballets with nymphs disporting themselves.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY EXCAVATIONS

It is not entirely clear when in modern times the site at Fabrika Hill in Paphos was first recognised as that of a theatre, but it was certainly thought to be one by the time the Cypriot archaeologist Kyriakos Nikolaou conducted some preliminary excavations in the upper part of the seating area in the early 1960s. A team from the University of Trier did a season's work in 1987 but the principal excavation has been carried out by a team from the University of Sydney, beginning in 1995 and continuing almost every year since.

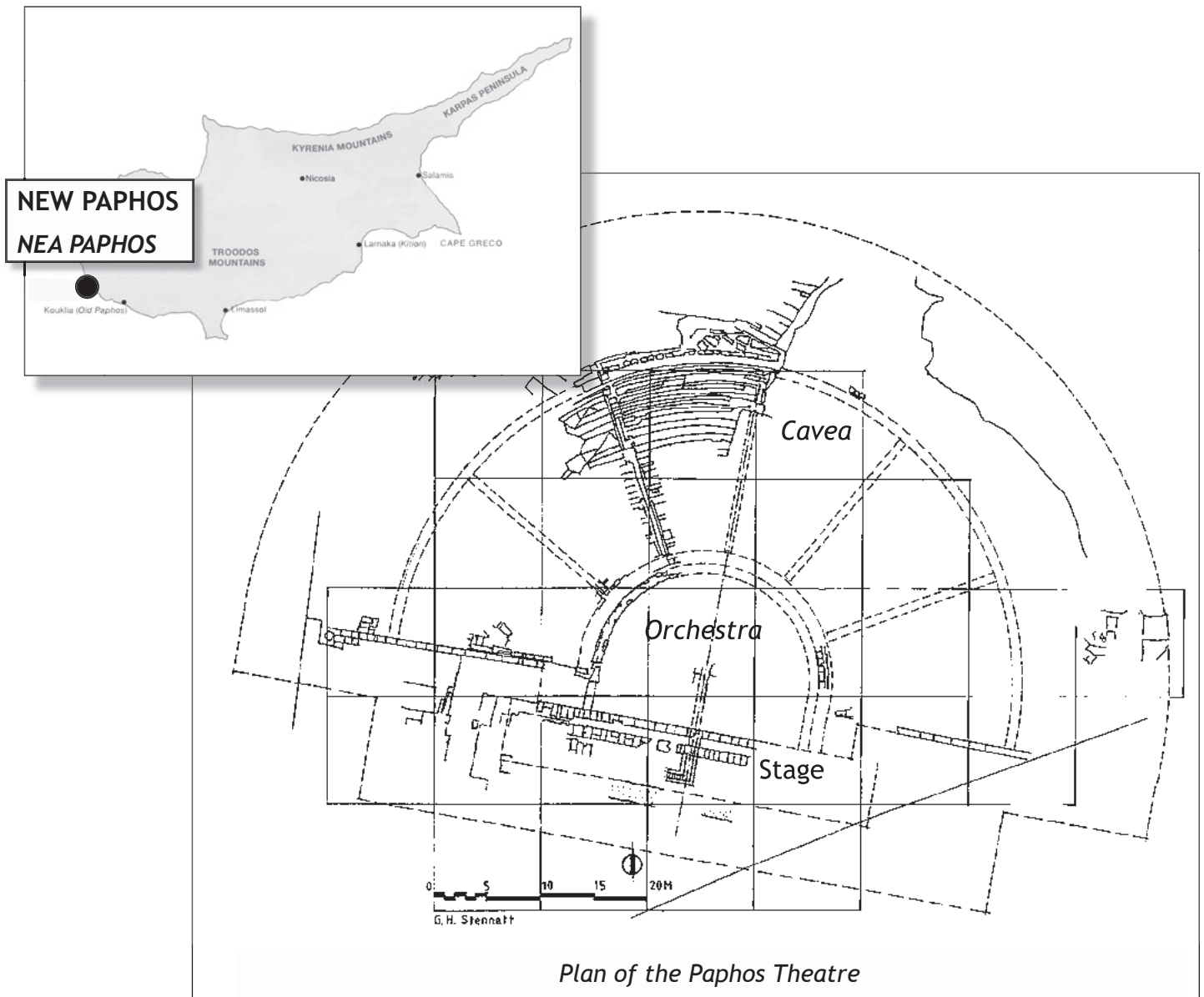
The appearance of the site has changed considerably since excavations began. Although part of the upper seating on the *cavea* (audience seating) had been exposed by weathering and soil erosion for many years, most of the site was covered by soil. The series of exploratory

trenches opened by the University of Trier's team in 1987 revealed some of the walls of a medieval building and a little of the surface of the theatre's *orchestra*. It has only been since 1995 that most of the structures of the ancient theatre site have come to light. The Sydney team first exposed a full section of the seating from the upper part of the *cavea* down to the front rows. We then demonstrated the extent of the western *parados* (an entrance to the theatre) and exposed part of the external support wall. At the same time we cleared part of the foundations of the stage-building(s) and the *orchestra* surface(s) of successive phases of usage of the theatre.

The team from the University of Sydney is directed by Emeritus Professor Richard Green and co-directed by Dr Craig Barker.

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Viewing Questions

1. Where and when did scripted plays develop in ancient Greece?
2. Which ancient Greek god is closely associated with ancient Greek theatre?
3. What was the social importance of theatre to the ancient Greeks?
4. What is the general chronology of the Paphos Theatre?
5. What records do archaeologists take while excavating sites such as the Paphos Theatre?
6. What is stratigraphy, and why is it important to archaeologists?
7. How was the construction date of the Paphos Theatre established?
8. What are some of the finds that have been unearthed during the Paphos Theatre excavations?
9. Why was the Paphos Theatre abandoned?
10. Who has excavated at the Paphos Theatre in Cyprus since 1995?

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Two Inscriptions from the Paphos Theatre

Found in 1916

... and to his son Marcus Aurelius...

...who donated the statues and the parodoi and the ...

Found in 2002

... of the Capitol and to the Emperor Titus Aelius Marcus Antoninus...

Augusta Claudia Flavia Paphos, the sacred mother-city of the cities of Cyprus...

The 1916 inscription was found in the vicinity of the theatre, while the 2002 inscription was found during excavations by the University of Sydney.

The 2002 inscription is on a marble slab that would have once been on the front of the stage building. It is from a larger inscription of which the 1916 find is also part.

The 2002 inscription was found lying face-down as the slab had been reused around 250 AD as a

threshold block between the *orchestra* and the western *parodos* (entrance corridor). The slab had been reused when the theatre was remodelled to allow water fountains to be used in the theatre's *orchestra* for water spectacles.

The Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius ruled from AD 138-161.

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius ruled from AD 161-180.

Questions

1. Who was Emperor of Rome when the inscriptions were made?
2. Who was the Emperor's son when the inscriptions were made?
3. During what years could the inscriptions have been carved?
4. What do the inscriptions imply happened to the theatre at this time?
5. What involvement did the Imperial family have in this event?
6. Why would the Imperial family have been involved in such an event?
7. What do the inscriptions imply about how the stage building would have looked at this time?
8. What does the find-spot of the 2002 inscription tell us about the later history of the theatre?
9. What sort of changes occurred to the structure of the theatre around AD 250?
10. What does this change in design tell us about the sort of entertainment seen in the theatre at this time?

- ANSWERS
1. Emperor Antoninus Pius
 2. Marcus Aurelius
 3. Sometime between AD 138-161 during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius
 4. Mention of new statues and entrance corridors implies that the theatre had been recently renovated
 5. The Imperial family donated money towards the rebuilding of the theatre
 6. This was one way for the Imperial family to show their involvement with the local community
 7. As the inscription is on marble it implies that the stage building was covered in marble
 8. As the slab had been reused, it shows that the theatre had been remodelled by around AD 250
 9. The reuse of the inscription was to enable water spectacles to be held in the theatre's *orchestra*
 10. The change in design may reflect a move towards spectacles rather than classic plays