The Ancient Theatre of Philippopolis (Plovdiv, Bulgaria)

Maya MARTINOVA-KYUTOVA / Nicolay SHARANKOV

Abstract: This article gives a short presentation of the results of the archaeological surveys of the theatre in Philippopolis as well as an outline of the information revealed from the epigraphic material found there. Built in its present form in the late 1st – early 2nd c. AD, the theatre was reconstructed several times and functioned until the end of the 4th c. AD. The rich epigraphic material consists of nine honorific inscriptions on statue-bases from two different periods – the late 1st to the early 2nd c., and the first half of the 3rd c.; at least four building inscriptions from the 2nd – 4th centuries; numerous inscriptions denoting seats for eminent citizens or groups of persons; builders’ marks, graffiti, etc.

Key words: Roman Thrace, Philippopolis, Roman theatre, public spectacles.

The building

The theatre of Philippopolis was surveyed in 1968-1978 by Liliya Botusharova. The northern entry was unearthed in 1982-1984. Additional archaeological surveys have been made by Maya Martinova-Kyutova in 2008-2009. The restoration of the theatre was carried out between 1979 and 1981 by a team headed by the architect Vera Kolarova.

The huge open-air theatre of Philippopolis (fig. 1) was built on the southern slope of the Three Hills, where it encompasses the whole area between the two southern hills, Dzhambaz tepe and Taxim tepe. The theatre has a semi-circular, tiered form. It takes advantage of the natural stone slope, turned to the south-east. The layout is larger than a semicircle and the outer diameter reaches 82 m.

The cavea consists of 28 concentric rows of seats, divided by a middle passage (diazoma) into two tiers. The two tiers are cut across by narrow radial stairways, which divide the cavea into wedge-shaped sectors (cunei). Ima cavea is divided into 6 cunei by seven stairways, three of which lead to the orchestra, while media cavea consisted of 12 cunei. The cavea is flanked by analemmata made of quadrae, with foundations on the bedrock of the sloping hillside. The rocky terrain constitutes the natural substructure of the theatron, the seats step on the rocks, which in places are chiselled or filled in with levelling courses (Коларова 2006, 87).

The orchestra has the shape of a horseshoe. The diameter of its semi-circular part measures 26.64 metres. The floor is of white mortar laid on the flattened rock.

The stage building (scaena) is an elongated three-level structure, with parascena to the east and to the west, having once held staircases, abutting the cavea. The stage floor (proscaenium) is 3.16 m high.
and is decorated with an embedded Ionic colonnade. Three symmetrically positioned doors connect the hypsocaenium to the orchestra. The facades of the parascaenia, overlooking the cavea, consist of two two-storey, four-column porticos, treated in keeping with the Roman Ionic order and crowned with triangular pediments. Scaenae frons is constituted of two three-column porticos, of two levels, with the first level treated in the Roman Ionic order, and the second – in the Roman Corinthian order. The facade has three door openings, the middle door (porta regia) being the largest in size (Коларова 2006, 87-89).

The side entrances (parodoi) to the orchestra, initially not covered and vaulted later, connect the cavea to the skene building. In the centre of the orchestra, a steep underground passage starts, equipped with a vertical aperture (dimensions 4.90 x 3.50 m), vaulted when under the stage building and leading away from the building. This facility had draining functions as well as usage linked to the theatre performances and gladiatorial combats (Ботушарова 1980).

The entry from the north to the theatre is a stairway, connected to the diazoma. In the middle of it starts a vaulted underground passage, leading to the north uphill. The loggia for the dignitaries was built above the vault (Коларова 2006, 89).

Based on certain elements of the theatre of Philippopolis, it may be inferred that it was the venue for part of the munera et venationes (gladiatorial spectacles and wild beast hunts). The three stairways which reach the orchestra show traces of closing metal grids. The upper surface of the platform near the orchestra bears traces of built security equipment for the audience. After the two entries (πάροδοι) were vaulted, they were also secured (Bouley 1996, 114-115; Вагалински 2009, 76-78).

The last significant reconstructions of the theatre took place in the beginning of the 4th c. In the course of the archaeological surveys, carried in the area of the northern exit, masonry structures were unearthed (fig. 1/1), evidencing the construction of additional rows of seats resting on radial walls (summa cavea), enlarging the cavea (Мартинова-Кютова 2009). Near the eastern parascaenium and vaulted entry (πάροδος), there is a stairway (fig. 1/3) built of statue bases and architectural elements (Sharankov 2005b, 55; Кесякова 2006, 146; Мартинова-Кютова / Шаранков 2017). The latest building inscription from AD 305-311 (see below # 9) attests a reconstruction of the theatre, possibly including the architectural ornamentation of the stage building. It was probably out of security considerations that, in the beginning of the 4th c., a high wall has been erected to the east of the stage building, closing the eastern stairway and limiting the access to the building from the south (fig. 1/5). The wall is in the opus mixtum technique and it reaches up to the high bedrock and bears the character of period wall masonry of Philippopolis.

The building functioned until the end of the 4th c. AD, when it was destroyed, probably by an earthquake.

**Inscriptions**

Since the results of the excavations remain unpublished, except for some short notes and preliminary reports, our knowledge about the building depends largely upon the numerous Greek inscriptions found there. They are of different types – honorific inscriptions on statue-bases, building inscriptions from different parts of the theatre, inscri-

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Early honorific inscriptions (late first – early second century AD)

The earliest building inscription from the theatre (see below) is dated to the end of the rule of Emperor Trajan (AD 116-117); however, there is strong evidence that the building had existed at least a few decades before that date. Some remains of an earlier building with a larger orchestra have been found, but it was impossible to examine them thoroughly without damaging the well-preserved Trajanic building. There are also several honorific inscriptions on statue-bases found in the theatre, which can be dated to the late first – early second century AD.

1. The statue-base for Ti. Claudius Sacerdos Iulianus (fig. 2/1) honours him as procurator Augusti (ἐπίτροπος Σεβαστοῦ) of Thrace, an equestrian office he must have held before his adlectio inter praetores which took place ca. AD 96-98 (Sharankov 2005a, 235-237, # 1).

2. Another honorific inscription from the AD 90s is for an important local magistrate – T. Flavius Cotys, son of [Rhescu?]poris

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Fig. 1. Plan of the theatre in Philippopolis: 1 summa cavea; 2 parodoi; 3 fourth-century stairway; 4 entrances to the diazoma; 5 wall in opus mixtum (plan by M. Martinova-Kyutova and architect D. Mushtanova)
(fig. 2/2)*, seemingly a descendant of the last kings of Thrace, who held multiple offices in Philippopolis and the province:

Τὸν [ἀ]πὸ προγόνων πρῶτον | τῆς ἐπαρχείας καὶ ἐνάρετον ἄνδρα, [ἀ]ρχιερέα τε τρις τῆς | Ἑθρακῶν ἐπαρχείας καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ πόλεων καὶ ἕγικον τῆς | μητροπόλεως καὶ ἐργεπιστάτην | διὰ τοῦ πρῶτον ἄρξαι τόπον μεγάλοις ἔργοις τὴν πόλιν κεκοσμηκότα, | δημοφιλῆτον καὶ ἀξιόπολον Ἀσκληπείου Τίτων Φλάουιον [Ρησκου?] | πορεῶς ὕσ τοὺς Κυρέινα Κοτ[ν], etc.

The statue was erected not by the city like the one for the procura-

*The upper right part of the inscription was published in 2005 (Sharankov 2005b, 55-58, #1 = AE 2005, 1380 = SEG 55, 753); the other part of the statue-base was identified among the re-used stones in a Late antique staircase (Sharankov 2005b, 57), but the inscribed surface was not visible, so it was not until the extraction of the base from the staircase in 2016 (during excavations by M. Martinova-Kyutova) when its text became available (Шаранков 2017, 779-780, #2).
tor, but by a private person whose name is partially lost – we see only
his patronymic and signum – 

\[ \tilde{o} \text{ deînâ} \] Σωστράτου ο̣ και Πολλίων. The
expression μεγάλους ἐργοὺς τὴν πόλιν κεκοσμηκότα, ('during his of-
fice as first archon') he adorned the city with magnificent buildings',
as already suggested (Sharankov 2005b, 57), could imply that one of
these buildings was the theatre itself, and therefore its construction
had started under Domitian.

Both inscriptions already mention Philippopolis as metropolis – a
title supposedly given to the city by Emperor Domitian and connected
with its establishment as seat of κοινὸν Θρᾴκων, the Common Council
of the province (Sharankov 2005a, 241-242).

3-4. Two other honorific inscriptions from the theatre, erect-
ed simultaneously and with similar texts – the one for the Council
of the province of Thrace, here called τὸ κοινοβούλιον τῆς Θρᾴκῶν
ἐπαρχείας (fig. 2/3), and the other for the demos of Perinthus (fig. 2/4)
– belong to the same period (end of the first – beginning of the second
century AD). Since the inscription for Perinthus mentions homonoia,
it has been supposed that it marked the end of a conflict between the
two cities, provoked by the foundation of the koinon and the emperor's
decision to grant the title of metropolis to Philippopolis and not to
the provincial capital Perinthus (Sharankov 2005b, 58-62, # 2; 2007b, 519-
521, # 2, 2a; AE 2005, 1379, 1381; SEG 55, 754-755).

5. The inscription honouring L. Cassius Severus, prefect of
cohors IV Thracum, procurator of Macedonia and Thrace and prefect of the
Misene fleet (IGBulg V 5410 = AE 1993, 1382) has been dated to the
time of Septimius Severus (Ботушарова 1985; Boteva 1993), but both
the lettering and the text suggest that it is probably no later than the
Trajanic or early Hadrianic period7.

These honorific inscriptions reveal the theatre as an important
– or even the most important – place of civic life in that period.
However, since there are no inscriptions which could be connected
with a date earlier than ca. AD 85, we can safely conclude that – even
if an earlier building had existed there – the theatre of Philippopolis
was built in its present form and appearance in the late first – early
second century AD.

Building inscriptions
Four building inscriptions dated to different periods have been found in the theatre8.

6. The earliest building inscription is dated to the end of Trajan's
rule, AD 116-117 (Sharankov 2005a, 237-240, # 2 = AE 2005, 1375 =
SEG 55, 763). It was engraved on the three marble blocks of the Ionic
architrave-frieze which is now built in the first range of the recon-
structed east para scaenium (fig. 3):

\[ \Upsilon \tilde{e} \pi \epsilon \tau \iota \tilde{e} \alpha \upsilon \tau \iota \kappa \iota \alpha \iota \nu \omicron \omicron \alpha \nu \theta \iota \tau \rho \iota \nu \omicron \alpha \nu \theta \iota \tau \nu \omicron \nu \tau \omicron \iota \alpha \nu \sigma \tau \alpha \varsigma \nu \tilde{e} \upsilon \zeta \iota \upsilon \\
\] or the service in cohors IV
Thracum, which is not mentioned later
than the rule of Antoninus Pius (Spaul
2000, 378-379). The inscribed statue-
base – like the other ones from this early
period – is made of the same pinkish
breccia which was used largely in the
construction of the theatre; a statue-base
for emperor Trajan dated to AD 103-114
(IGBulg III.1 880) is made of the same
type of stone. On the problems caused by
the unusual career of L. Cassius Severus,
especially if the inscription is assigned
to a late (Severan) date, cf. Demougin /

According to V. Kolarova and V. Tankova, who participated in the exca-
vations, there was seemingly one more building inscription containing imperial
titulature (personal communication to
N. Sharankov, June 2009 and May 2011).
Unfortunately, I was unable to find the
stone or even a copy or photograph of the
inscription.
For the health and permanent existence of Imperator Nerva Traianus Caesar Augustus Germanicus Dacicus Parthicus Optimus, Plotina Augusta, and all their family, the Roman Senate and People, and the Council and Demos of Philippopolis, under the governor of the province of Thrace Gnaeus Minicius Faustinus (?), legatus Augusti pro praetore. Tarsas, son of Bassos, first archon (or archpriest) of the Thracian metropolis, and his wife (?) ... constructed this "tower" to the amount of ... denarii.

The cognomen of Emperor Trajan Ἄριστος (Optimus) sets the date of the inscription after August-September AD 114; the space available to the end of the line allows us to restore also Parthicus, which provides even a more exact date between February 116 and August 117. On the basis of the placement of the inscription, it has been suggested that πύργος 'tower' here is to be understood as some part of the theatre, apparently the παρασκήνιον.

7. Two fragments of an architrave-frieze bearing the right end of an inscription (Sharankov 2005a, 240-241 = AE 2005, 1376; Шаранков 2014, 289,обр. 3a-b) have been found among the ruins of the west parascaenium; they are joining, but are now erroneously placed wide apart in the reconstructed parascaenium. The lettering is the same as that of the other inscription, and the text was apparently similar, although with somewhat different arrangement; therefore this inscription should be contemporaneous with the one of the east parascaenium. Only two words are preserved, διαμονής in l. 1 and [ἡγεμ]ονεύοντος in l. 2. We could restore the beginning of this text as follows:

[Ὑ πὲρ τῆς αὐτοκράτορος Νέρου Τ ραιανοῦ etc. ὑγείας καὶ διαμονής | καὶ Πλωτίνης Σεβαστῆς καὶ τοῦ σύνπαντος αὐτῶν οἴκου etc., ηγεμ[ονεύοντος | [ἐπαρχείας Θράκης τοῦ δείνος etc. - - -].

8. One building inscription can be dated to the first half of the third century. It is engraved on the side of one of the marble blocks which constituted the railing above the central entrance to the diazoma...
(fig. 4). It attests that something (seemingly the box above the entrance) was built or decorated ‘through the common funds of the “Sacred gerousia” of the city (ἐκ τῶν κοινῶν τῆς ἱερᾶς γερουσίας), when its treasurer was Aurelius Polygeros, son of Alexander’ 9 (Шаранков 2004b, 198-199, # 1 = AE 2005, 1385 = SEG 55, 765; Шаранков 2014, 277).

9. The latest building inscription – which is also the latest inscription found in the theatre – is dated to the period AD 305-311. It is on a group of architrave blocks from the upper part of the scaenae frons (fig. 5):

Ἐπὶ δεσπότου ἡμῶν Γαλερίου Οὐαλερίου Μαξιμιανοῦ Σεβ(αστοῦ) τὸ πᾶν ἔργον ἀνενεώθη (?), || ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Θρᾴκης (vel Θρ[ακῶν ἐπαρχείας]) τῆς ἡρου τοῦ διασημότατου, λογιστεύον(τος) Σατορνείνου.

‘In the time of our Lord Galerius Valerius Maximianus Augustus, the entire building [was renewed], when - - - Teres, vir perfectissimus, was governor of (the province of) Thrace, and Saturninus was logistes (i.e. curator civitatis).’

The governor of Thrace has been identified with Teres, mentioned in the life of the martyrs from Marcianopolis Maximus, Asclepiodota and Theodotus, who suffered during the persecution of emperor Galerius Maximianus (Шаранков 2014; AE 2015, 1269 bis) 10.

**Honorific inscriptions from the first half of the third century AD**

A second group of honorific inscriptions is dated to the first half of the third century AD. It includes two inscriptions honouring agonothetes of the Pythian games in Philippopolis – Publius Virdius Iulianus and - - - Sebazianus, one posthumous inscription for the rhetor Publius Virdius Iulianus Junior (Sharankov 2005b, 62-64, ## 3, 3a; 66-67, # 3c = IGBulg V 5468; AE 2005, 1382-1384; SEG 55, 757-759), and one fragment containing the end of an inscription (unpublished). The statue-bases for the two agonothetes were found in situ, on the orchestra, in front of the western door of the stage building.
Their placing there could be connected with a reconstruction of the theatre – probably the same which is attested by the building inscription from the box above the northern entrance (above # 8).

**Inscriptions on the seats**

There are numerous inscriptions on the seats denoting (honorary) places (Fig. 6). For example, there are 17 inscriptions connected with the phylai of the city (Борушарова 1984; IGBulg V 5412). It has been shown that they can be dated to two or three different periods with the number of the phylai increasing – from six in the early second century, allocated in the entire ima cavea, to ten in the third century, when each phyle had only one row of seats (apparently for its officials) in sector A or F of the ima cavea (Шаранков 2004a, 153-154, # 4, 158, fig. 8). An inscription on the front of sector d in the second range designates it as place ‘of the philokaiasares’ (φιλοκαισάρων), seemingly persons connected with the imperial cult, e.g. members of the gerousia (Шаранков 2004b, 199, 206, фиг. 1 = AE 2005, 1386 = SEG 55, 769). One inscription mentions a techne, i.e. a professional association (sector B, row 1; unpublished), and on the row above it (B2) we see another one, for the family of the Munatii (Мунатий: Шаранков 2006, 194, # II.1). There are also inscriptions for individual citizens like the phylarches Claudius Dorzinthes (E1, on the front; Шаранков 2004a, 151-152), the agoranomos (?) Theagenes (D1; Шаранков 2014, 279, note 10); Celer (E2; unpublished); Marcianus (B5; unpublished); Ви[- - -]нус (e3; unpublished); etc.

**Builders’ marks**

Numerous marks are seen on the stone blocks of the theatre. For example, the joining sides of the upright blocks on the front of the cavea facing the orchestra have identic letters of the Greek alphabet: AA, BB, ГГ, etc. (Fig. 7/1); the holes on the upper surface of the front
of the *ima cavea* – which apparently served for mounting movable railings when the theater was used for gladiatorial games and wild beast hunts – are marked with consecutive letters of the Greek alphabet: A, B, Γ, etc. (*fig. 7/2*); more complex marks, including fractional numbers, are found on the stone blocks of the *analemmata* (*fig. 7/3*), or on the plinths of the front of *media cavea* facing the *diazoma*.

**Conclusion**

The theatre of Philippopolis is one of the most significant public buildings of Roman Thrace, and its excellent state of preservation increases even more its importance for the study of architecture in the province. For three hundred years of existence, the theatre had undergone several renovations before its final destruction and abandonment at the end of the fourth century AD. Its numerous inscriptions present a rich source of information on the history and administration of Philippopolis and the province of Thrace from the Flavian period to the Tetrarchy. Bearing all this in mind, it is to be deeply regretted that the theatre, after having been excavated more than three decades ago, still awaits its proper publication. The present short notes can by no means compensate for this unfortunate fact, but it is hoped that they could at least provide some information and provoke interest in further and more thorough research of the theatre.

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