

## THE ROMAN THEATRE OF BRACARA AUGUSTA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the main features of the roman theatre of Bracara Augusta identified in 1999. Although it is still under study, a significant set of evidence made it possible to present its characteristics, to value the socioeconomic issues related with its construction and to discuss the aspects related to the development of the NW Iberian Peninsula cities, where traditionally this type of equipment was believed to be absent, and to understand the diffusion of roman public architecture models in peripheral regions within the Western Empire.

### INTRODUCTION

The Roman theatre of Bracara Augusta was identified in 1999 when the northern part of the 'Alto da Cividade' public baths *palaestra* was under excavation. Located within a protected archaeological area it was excavated after 2002 and is still under research.

The monument was built at the beginning of the second century AD on the western slope of 'Alto da Cividade' hill and presents a clear adaptation to the surrounding topographic constraints, bounding the wide platform in which the *forum* was also located (Fig. 1). It is a typical Latin theatre with the classic articulation between the scenic body and the *cavea* area covering the *aditi* performing a prime example of this type of public architecture. It also represents the first theatre known in a city located on the NW of the Iberian Peninsula, a region where traditionally this type of building was believed to be absent. Presently a significant area of the theatre has been uncovered enabling us to put forward a set of preliminary considerations with regards to its structural organization<sup>1</sup>. These will be, thereby, summarily presented on the present paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the theatre's area currently discovered was excavated between 2004 and 2008 under the funded project "Preliminary Study of Bracara Augusta Theater".

### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The theatre measures 72.63 m diameter (245 ft) and is bounded by a large wall with around 3.70 m width (14 ft). The *cavea* has 13.10 m height and was partially implanted on the slope of a hill. It was divided in three levels separated by *praecinctiones* measuring around 1.20 m wide (4 ft). Only part of the *ima cavea* is known and it still exhibits some stairs with 0.70 m (2.4 ft) deep and 0.40 m high (1.4 ft).

The *orchestra* has a maximum diameter of 20.80 m (70 ft) of, including the *poedria* and the *praecinctio*, lacking the pavement that is assumed to be similar to the one existing at the northern *aditus maximus*, which is composed of granitic slabs. This *aditus* has 2.40 m (8 ft) wide and links with the northern *parascaenium* through a staircase with five steps.

The *pulpitum* has a length of 29.54 m (100 ft) and a canonic height of 5 Roman feet. At the center of this space is settled the *hyposcaenium*, which length equals the diameter of the *orchestra*. Two pits with around 3 meters deep and a N/S orientation have been found in its interior. It is believed they have included wooden devices designed to activate the *siparium*. The *frons pulpiti* was painted and is structured in rectangular exedras, with the exception of the central one that presents a semicircular shape.

The scenic body was bounded by the *parascaenia*. The northern one measures 9.49 m (32 ft) wide by 10.70 m (36 ft) length and was limited on its western side by the *postcaenium* wall, with around 0.90 m (3

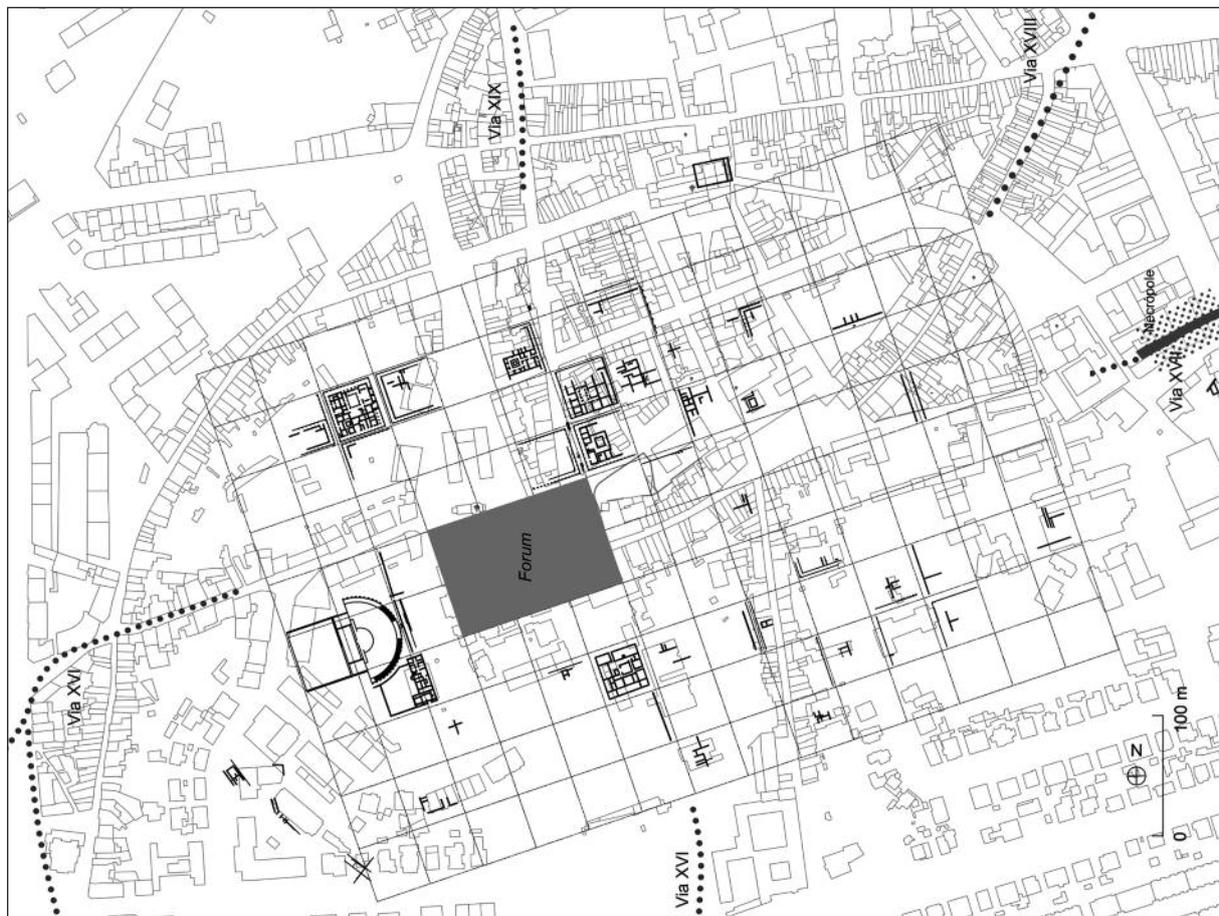


Fig. 1. Urban layout of Bracara Augusta with location of the theatre and the annexed public thermal building.

ft) wide. In the rear back of the building, a *porticus* with 7 m (24 ft) width was also identified, bordering a pavement of *opus signinum*.

The theatre structure was framed on the slope of the upper platform of the Cividade hill. A slope of around 20 degrees was created to accommodate part of the *cavea* that was adapted to the natural rock. To construct its highest part it was necessary to add substructures to create the rightful gradient a process also ensured by the reuse of part of the previous existing buildings.

Given the width of the perimeter wall, with around 3.7 m it is believed that a *porticus in summa cavea* has existed with around 3 m (10 ft) wide. It must have been accessed from one or two doors located on the eastern theatre façade.

The excavations enabled the identification of several architectonic elements, some of which belonging to the *scaenae frons*, namely an Attic base, one Corinth capital and column shifts with different sizes. The wider column shift fits with the diameter of the attic base and according to its size it is possible

that these elements could have belonged to the first level of the scenic front. Given the size of the theatre (72.63 m) and the *cavea* height (13.10 m) it is possible to admit that the *scaenae frons columnatio* had only two floors. (Fig. 2)

#### URBAN SETTING AND THE POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE THEATRE

Public building works from any city were always the result of a political decision as its construction required the social and political recognition of its public utility<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the construction of Bracara Augusta's theatre raised together with the annexed public thermal building at the beginning of the second century seems to respond to a decision of *ordo decurionum*, signing up, quite possibly, an ambitious program of public works for revaluation of the monumental area north-west of the *forum* located on the western part of the *forum*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Mar, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Martins, 2005.

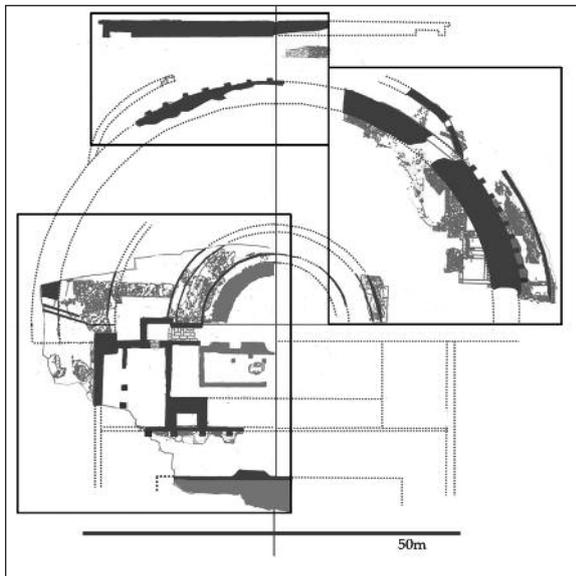


Fig. 2. Restitution of the theater plan according with the excavated areas.

The ideological meaning of roman theatres justified that their construction was fully dependant on political decisions related with the building size and their public impact. The former political decision refers to the number of spectators that would sit in the theatre, which determined the building size and the construction costs. More than the size itself, what the commissioners stipulated was the buildings capacity<sup>4</sup>. Taking into consideration the *cavea* diameter it is possible to estimate that the theatre of Bracara Augusta has housed 4000/4500 spectators considering a useful area of 3,000 square meters<sup>5</sup>. The second political decision was normally related with the public image the theatre would held and was associated with its urban implantation, to the volume built up and to the materials used in the finishing.

We are aware that the theatre held a privileged relationship with the *forum* (Fig. 1), a recurrent feature in other cities that was associated with the imperial cult liturgies and the involvement of sacred images in the *ludi scaenic*<sup>6</sup>. In order to construct the theatre it was necessary to demolish pre-existing buildings and to deactivate 1 *cardus* and 2 *decumani*. The emerging urban changes reinforced the *ordo decurionum* role and reflected the importance of theatre construction as expressing the social and economical development of the city and its elites

<sup>4</sup> Sear, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Martins *et al.*, 2013: 41-76.

<sup>6</sup> Gros, 1987: 319-346; 1990: 381-390.



Fig. 3. Location of Bracara Augusta theatre in the context of Hispania theatres distribution, according with Sear, 2006, Map 3.

enriching at the beginning of the second century. These events justified the great investment the city witnessed with the construction of several public buildings as the theatre and the amphitheatre<sup>7</sup>.

The administrative territorial relevance of Bracara Augusta as capital of a juridical convent fully justifies the construction of monumental buildings as theatres considering the role these buildings have played. In fact, theatres always represent aggregator elements of the civic communities also expressing the conformity of the provincial elites with the roman lifestyle and their fidelity towards the imperial power. Thus, they performed paramount structures within cities urban programmes becoming privileged spaces in the entertainment and liturgical propaganda of the imperial regime and a prestige tool serving the *romanitas*.

Thereby, the architectonic reconstruction of the roman theatre of Braga (Fig. 2) performs a paramount tool to the overall understanding of the level of development existing within the civic community of Bracara Augusta and also to the debate related with the diffusion of the roman architectonic models and their role in shaping urban landscapes of the western Empire, more specifically in the peninsular NW.

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<sup>7</sup> Morais, 2001:55-76.

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