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## **Monuments of Spectacle as Places of Cultural Interaction: Initiating Explorations at the Theatre of Uthina (Oudhna), Tunisia**

### ***Introduction***

As monuments of spectacle, classical theaters have been studied in relative detail, yet only with what can best be described as limited success. Clearly, the monuments would have been part of the lure for travelers to regional centers and to certain key cities. In fact, theatres can be seen as nodes of attraction and interaction, whereby they provided impetus for people to travel to regional centers, while at the same time offering opportunities for cultural interface. Much more work on a variety of interdisciplinary fronts is required to fully understand the links between the cultural role and the architecture of theatres. And while the related research work has recently intensified, very little of it has included research that turns to new archaeological methods, be it interdisciplinary, technical, or otherwise. It is with the latter in mind that the present research is framed<sup>1</sup>.

The Theatre at Uthina (Oudhna), Tunisia, persists in spite of almost two millennia of abandonment. Unexcavated, unexplored and relatively unknown, the monument awaits detailed study and contextualization within the realm of Antiquity's monuments of spectacle. The monument is important for its architectural features, but perhaps more significantly, for its unique positioning within in the urban plan of Uthina. The present work involves cutting edge field techniques, all designed to render a research program that will help to understand the architecture of the built structure and the role of the same monument within the cultural-urban context. This brief paper outlines the preliminary results of research undertaken during the 2004-06 period and highlights a set of significant architectural finds.

### ***The Research***

The field research has thus far had five objectives, including the identification of the full aerial extent of the theatre, the clarification of the theatre's main components – *cavea*, *orchestra* and *scaenae* wall, the preliminary analysis of the *cavea*'s structure and circulation systems, the assessing of the extent of the monument's preservation, and, in a general sense, the establishment of the monument's chronology.

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<sup>\*1</sup> This work was carried out in collaboration with Michel Florenzano, Michel Berthelot and Meriem Zammel, Université de Marseilles, Christian Landes, Institut National de l'Histoire de l'Art, Paris, Renato Salerie, Université de Lyon, and Michel Janon, Institut de recherche sur l'architecture antique, CNRS, Aix-en-Provence. The permit for this work was granted by Habib Ben Hassen.

Three types of interventions were carried out. First, a trench was opened in the center of the *orchestra* and others in the *basilicae* areas to help in establishing the chronology and understand the level of preservation. Second, several areas of the monument (within the *cavea* and the *parodoi*) were cleared of debris in order to enable surveying and to better understand the monument's components, and third, a detailed digital survey and almost 1,000 air photographs were completed.

### **Extant Remains**

As one leaves the centre of the settlement's urban plan, and along its outskirts, a series of architectural elements pierce the ground (fig. 1). Where the theatre would have stood, arches of two types appear at various levels, some assembled from smaller *moëllons* and other made of large blocs, installed at levels obviously corresponding to rises in the ground and by observation, to the various levels of the *cavea* (figs. 2-3). Architectonic blocs, or support consoles, made of several large blocs and measuring approximately 3 x 3 m, appear to have been constructed as the main supporting elements for the *cavea* (fig. 4). As with the arches, the support consoles are installed along concentric rings, presumably following the *cavea*'s curvature. In addition to the arches and consoles piercing the ground, one significant wall section still stands, as well as prominent flat surfaces just centimeters below the sandy soil (fig. 5). The whole constitutes a set of building components that should eventually render enough indices for a full hypothetical reconstruction of the monument.

There are thus three sets of architectural components from which we can begin to plan a research strategy. The first are sets of arches located along the *cavea*'s curvature; the second are architectonic blocs; and the third set of indices consists of various elements located throughout the *cavea* and *scaenae* areas, such as the important three-arch extant wall segment. All situated on a moderately flat



Fig. 1 - Typical Architectural Element.



Fig. 2 - Typical Stone Arch.



Fig. 3 - Typical Bloc Arch.





Fig. 4 - Architectonic Support Bloc.



Fig. 5 - Cavea Wall Section.

topography, with the theatre having been supported in large part on the consoles and sets of superimposed arches. No rock outcrops appear and we can only presume that the theatre was built on extensive foundations or on deep bedrock. It is probable that the landscape was modified with a small hill perhaps created in order to elevate the rear *cavea*.

### **Research Results**

The main findings of the explorations include the clear identification of the entrances through the *parodoi*, the determination of the extent of the *scaenae* wall and the *orchestra*, the establishment of the western *basilicae* details, and the surveying and plotting of the *cavea* and *scaenae* remains. The *media cavea* is divided into nine *cunei*, separated by eight of the large consoles, presumably constructed to support the seating superstructure. The *ima cavea* was built as a free-standing monument, bordered by two walls of *opus quadratum*.

### **The Cavea**

Excavations and various clearings enabled close inspection of the *cavea* and its limits, as well as the eastern and western *parodoi*. The resulting analysis facilitated the tracing of the theatre axis, thus providing a first step in plotting the monument's plan and eventually undertaking a comparative analysis of the same plan, with Vitruvius' ideal Latin theatre tenets<sup>2</sup>. The *cavea*'s diameter is approximately 61 m.

Within the *ima cavea* there are significant extant remains. Along one radiant, a set of four architectural elements persists, providing ideal information to examine the *cavea*'s architecture at its different elevations. First, the entrances through the *parodoi* are relatively clear. Second, excavations and clearings along the lower reaches of the *cavea* uncovered the foundation blocs onto which the seating substructures were installed. Third, along the same radiant, one particular element, still in place, outlines the arc of the *cavea*. And a fourth significant element is an archway constructed of smaller stones.

The latter archway is situated above a 1,8 m passageway and slopes downwards towards the center of the *cavea* (fig. 6). The downwards slope is approximately 25 degrees. The same passageway is bordered by

<sup>2</sup> The results of the topographic survey, the Vitruvius comparative analysis, and photo mosaicing are part of the ongoing research analysis. These research program components are not discussed within the confines of the present article.





Fig. 6 - Archway, *Cavea* Access.



Fig. 7 - *Cavea* Wall Section – Angled View.



Fig. 8 - *Cavea* Wall Section – Upper Section in *Opus Caementicium*.



Fig. 9 - *Cavea* Wall Section – Rear Segment.

large, smoothly chiseled blocs, all of some 1,5 m in length. Relatively close to the archway are similar blocs, in place. Their precise role in the architectonic arrangement of the passageway is not clear.

Combined with other *in situ* blocs, these elements together confirm a radial system of passageways within at least the lower portion of the *cavea*. Further field observations of consoles and archways within the *ima cavea* level confirm that a set of ten similar architectonic groupings correspond to other circulation passageways, both radiant and concentric.

Without doubt, the *media cavea* presents the most evocative pre-excitation structural element. This wall section is well preserved. The wall section reveals a host of design and construction details. The ensemble constitutes a portion of a wall constructed of large blocs, arranged in a curvilinear pattern within an arc of 19 degrees on a segment of 26,2 m. It is delimited by two massive substructure blocs. The wall segment extends to 3,3 m above ground, where three bays can be assessed (fig. 7). All of the construction blocs, as in most extant theatre segments, are well chiseled. The central dominant bay is framed by two cor-





Fig. 10 - *Summa Cavea* - Bloc Arch.



Fig. 11 - *Rear Cavea* – Stone Archway Opening.



Fig. 12 - *Rear Cavea* – Curvilinear Wall Base.

blocs attached and in need of more detailed analysis.

Further away from the center of the *cavea* and still behind the latter feature is another clue to the theatre's circulation network. A passageway, partially collapsed, is observable from above. Further towards the outer reaches of the monument, along the same radiant and oriented towards the monument's center, an archway provides an entrance to the inner area from the exterior via the corridor observable from the collapsed portion (fig. 11). The corridor is made of small blocs, is vaulted and covered in mortar. Yet further behind the *cavea*, a significant surface of large, flat blocs was uncovered (fig. 12). At least two courses of this

respondingly symmetric, slightly less monumental bays. The upper level of the wall comprises arcs in *opus caementicium* (fig. 8), each with traces that show an orientation towards the centre of the *cavea*, suggesting a construction detail that is markedly different from the lower bloc section. The section above the central dominant arch is level, while the sections above the two symmetrical arches radiate outwards and towards the central *cavea*. Interestingly, the rear section of the same wall segment also comprises a substantial massif in *opus caementicium* (fig. 9). It sits upon a lower archway, perpendicular to the main wall segment. Clearing of the debris around the massif revealed a probable circulation arcade behind the main wall segment; all substructure blocs along this level appear to include this feature.

Along the highest extant level of the *cavea*, and roughly along the same axial transect, a further feature is located at 35 m from the theatre's hypothetical center (fig. 10). While not analyzed in detail, the arrangement suggests a passageway leading to circulation corridors within the upper *cavea*. The main element of the same ensemble, an arch comprising five main blocs, measures 1,8 m in diameter. The arrangement is complex, with various





Fig. 13 - *Scaenae* Building – *Basilicae* Feature.

wall remain; it appears to follow the curvature of the *cavea*. The wall may have been meant as a structural load bearing component that would have been required to spread the weight of the exterior face of the *cavea*.



Fig. 14 - Extant wall surface, rear central arches.

### ***The Scaenae Building***

Two large consoles delimit what would have been a wide opening (7,0 m) at the rear of the *scaenae* wall, measuring approximately 42 m. Surprisingly, these are not symmetrical in terms of the theatre's hypothetical axis. Within each of these consoles, or as part of them, are the *basilicae*. The north-western sector of the building was excavated to a depth of approximately 1,5 m, reaching the initial built surface which is intact. The most important find in this sector is what can best be described as a semi-circular niche built out of large blocs cut to accommodate the cylindrical arrangement (fig. 13). Its diameter is 1,6 m, and three courses survive. The blocs are adapted to what may have been a narrow passageway leading from the outer to the inner *scaenae* building. A cornice fragment was uncovered within this area. Excavations in the corresponding north east corner of the *scaenae* building did not confirm a similar architectural feature; the section clearly has been robbed of its blocs and it is possible that the whole was removed.

Aside from the trench opened within the *orchestra* area, additional trenches were opened with varying results. No clear stratigraphy has thus far been identified, rendering the precise dating of the monument difficult. Along the eastern side of the *scaenae*, a clearing revealed the remains of a passageway leading from the outer theatre to the inner, lower *cavea*. This may have been an entrance to the lower *orchestra*. Its equivalent was also located on the western side.

Related to the same areas, there are examples of the type of construction used in what appears to be the entire theatre. Very large blocs making up the structural components, and quite small *moëllons* used to fill the gaps between the structural elements and the desired wall surfaces or curvatures, as well as some secondary archways. This shows up along all extant wall surfaces and we can clearly observe the technique behind the main, central arches (fig. 14).

The theatre probably dates to the first century CE, abandoned by the fourth or early fifth centuries, with at least one individual residential structure identified in the area where the *orchestra* would have been earlier built.



## **Conclusion**

The findings, while preliminary, are significant. A set of architectonic consoles, arranged in concentric patterns along the curvature of the *cavea*, served as the primary foundational elements onto which the theatre was constructed. Associated with the same consoles, archways in correspondingly concentric (and radial) arrangements remain to indicate the presence of ambulatory access passageways. An important wall segment, still standing, provides a set of clear indices as to how the *cavea* would have been designed and built. The *scaenae* building's foundations and *parodoi* bases remain relatively intact, outlining a massive structure with architectural details that appear specific to this theatre. Slightly beyond the monument, an important retaining wall may have formed part of the ensemble. A detailed topographic survey, presently being analyzed, was undertaken, with each console, archway and other elements plotted. Some one thousand air photos were taken and will form part of the analysis which is underway. Related to the latter, behind the *frons scaenae* is located what appears to be a *porticus post scaenam*, completely hidden by agricultural activity. In terms of stratigraphy, the finds have not been as revelatory as the architectural details. Robbing and occupancy over millennia have significantly disturbed the ground and much more exploration will be required to identify undisturbed areas, if they exist.

Finally, the theatre did not persist in an extra-urban context. The scale of the monument, at over 60 m in diameter, not only suggests a well-planned central place that rivals most other important centers of the region, but also suggests the basis for the establishing of what I have elsewhere termed a "center of recollection". A center of recollection is a central, regional, place operating as a recollective node that establishes a direct connection between a place removed from the center of power, and the center of power itself. Thus, in addition to operating as a landscape of power, the center of recollection confirms for the viewer, through place sensation and other facets, that the authority, popularity and rule of the central authority is valid, intact and extended to the "here and now". Beyond its architecture, what remains to be shown at Ithnia, is the connection between on the one hand the theatre and the urban plan, while on the other hand, the theatre in its regional context as a monument of spectacle.

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