

Fig. 1. Sparta, plan of acropolis (© BSA; Bosanquet, Wace, Dickins et alii 1905-1906).

but «Il est difficile de comprendre quel sens précis donner au terme, celui, général, d'un lieu de spectacle, ou celui d'un édifice spécialement destiné à accueillir des représentations théâtrales».⁹ In the latter case, it is unknown whether the classical theatre was on the same site as the Augustan one.¹⁰

The theatre was a marble-faced construction (Paus. 3, 14, 1)¹¹ and had a horseshoe-shaped orchestra (diameter m 25.52) and a hollow

1906 [Dickins], p. 395.

⁹ Richer 2005, p. 239.

¹⁰ According to F. Bölte, ancient authors with the term *theatron* referred not to a real theatre but to the theatrical setting for religious festivals in the *agora* and at the Amyclaeum; Bölte 1929, cols. 1365-1366. According to P. Cartledge «at some time in the third century Sparta acquired its first built theatre of normal Hellenistic type. It would not, I think, be entirely fanciful to associate this development with the new Hellenism of Areus I and the influx of funds from his potent ally Ptolemy II»; Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 34. See also Woodward 1925-1926, pp. 192-193; Woodward 1928-1930, pp. 152-156, 240; Dilke 1950, pp. 48-51. On the contrary, F. Kolb hypothesises that the earliest theatre was in the *agora*; Kolb 1981, pp. 79-81.

¹¹ The use of marble for a theatre is an innovation not only for Sparta but for Peloponnesian theatres in general. In addition, it has been underlined the unusual mixed building technique employed at Sparta: layered mud-brick and rubble-concrete for the foundations, stone and marble for the construction; Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, p. 100; Waywell 2002, pp. 247-248.

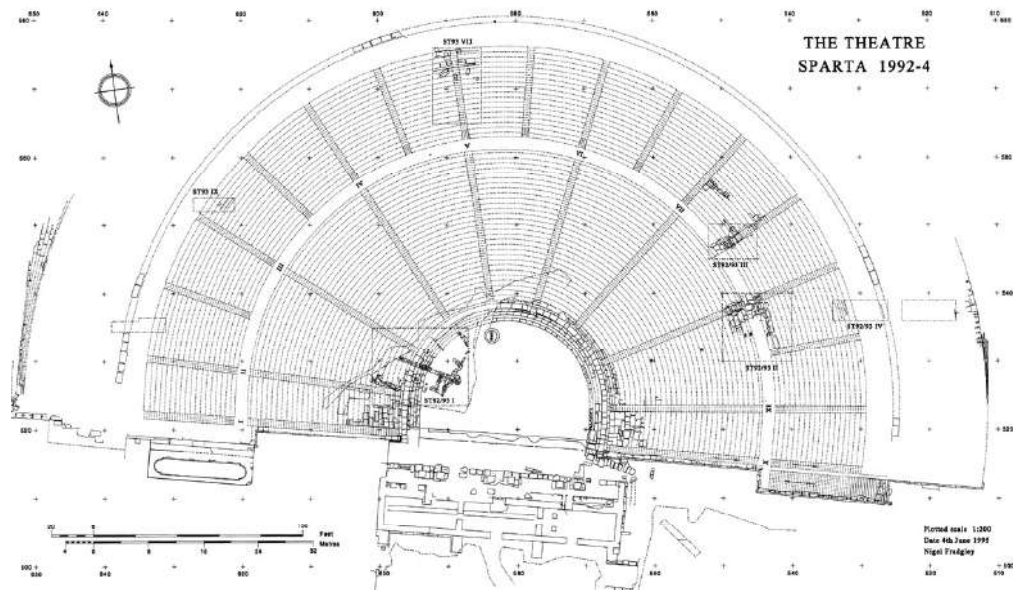


Fig. 2. Sparta, plan of the theatre by N. Fradgley (© BSA; elaboration from Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995).

(diameter m 114) whose central part rested on the hill, whereas its two side were supported by two massive retaining walls (fig. 2). The *cavea* was divided horizontally by a central gangway (*diazoma*) and 10 staircases divided the lower hollow into 9 *kerkides* with 31 rows of seats, whereas 17 staircases divided the *epitheatron* into 16 *kerkides* with 17 rows of seats.¹² In addition, it has been hypothesized that there was a colonnade of Doric order around the top of the upper *cavea*.¹³ The theatre was accessed from east by an open stairway with 55 steps which led to the *diazoma*.¹⁴ The peculiar feature of Sparta theatre is its wooden sliding-stage. Investigations by the British School at Athens in the late 1990s confirmed Bulle's hypothesis: the stage had rested on iron-clad rollers and was moved along a triple stone aisle. The mobile scene was slid between the orchestra and the *skanotheke*, the structure in the west *parodos* where this scene was stored when it was not in use.¹⁵

¹² Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995, pp. 240-244 [Waywell, Wilkes]; Waywell, Wilkes 1999, pp. 442-444; Waywell 2002, p. 247.

¹³ Colonnades at the top of theatres were considered a Roman feature, but the Spartan example has shown that it is a phenomenon of the late Hellenistic Greek theatres; Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, p. 100; Waywell 2002, p. 248. Sparta's theatre is similar in size to the classical Greek theatres at Epidauros and Megalopolis and shows some similarities with the latter which is considered the inspiration for Sparta, Buckler 1986, pp. 433-436; Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, p. 98; Waywell 2002, p. 247.

¹⁴ Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995, p. 440 [Waywell, Wilkes]; Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, pp. 97-103.

¹⁵ Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, pp. 103-108; Waywell, Wilkes 1999, pp. 452-454;

It has been suggested that the mobile scene was necessary in order to create free space when the theatre was used for assemblies, dances and contests during worship rituals. Part of the *Gymnopaediae* may have taken place in the theatre and during Sparta's other main festival, the *Hyacinthia*, «ἄλλοι (παῖδές) δ' ἐφ' ἵππων κεκοσμημένων τὸ θέατρον διεξέρχονται» (Ath. 139e).¹⁶ In addition, the theatre was also the place where the *sphaireis* game marking the transition from youth to adulthood took place. This was an annual tournament between five teams of twenty-year-old ballplayers (*sphaireis*).¹⁷ Although only athletic competitions are attested for the Caesarea, which was almost certainly founded in the Augustan age, the building of the theatre under Augustus led P. Cartledge and A. Spawforth to hypothesise «a new beginning of a kind consonant with institution for the first time of regular dramatic contests».¹⁸ Finally, the Uranian games, founded in 97 or 98 AD, in honour of Zeus Uranus, were celebrated every five years and included athletic and musical contests and theatrical performances that took place in the stadium or theatre.¹⁹

The discovery of an inscription (*IG V 1 691*) engraved on an epistyle block testifies that in the 78 AD the Emperor Vespasian gifted a steady Roman *scaenae frons*.²⁰ The stage-building had a façade on two-storey with three projecting porches and had three internal rooms.²¹ The stage

Waywell 2002, pp. 250-253. The mobile scene was subject of controversy among the scholars: A.M. Woodward interpreted the grooved channel blocks which formed a line in front of the stage as rain-water channels; Woodward, Hobling 1923-1925, pp. 148-149 [Woodward], Woodward 1925-1926, pp. 190-191. W. Dörpfeld suggested that they could belong to a trackway and he was followed by H. Bulle who hypothesised that the grooved blocks belonged to a trackway for a mobile scene; Bulle 1928, Bulle 1937, pp. 5-34. This hypothesis was strongly criticised by C. Buckler; Buckler 1986, pp. 431-436.

¹⁶ Brulé 1992; Pettersson 1992; Richer 2005; Vannini 2020.

¹⁷ Woodward 1951, pp. 197-199; Kennel 1995, pp. 59-61; Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 190; Lafond 2018, pp. 409-410.

¹⁸ Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 171.

¹⁹ Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, pp. 171-172.

²⁰ According to P. Cartledge and A. Spawforth, Vespasian probably donated funds for building work in the Spartan theatre «when he responded to requests for aid from provincial cities damaged by earthquake» (77 AD); Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 96.

²¹ Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995, pp. 444-445 [Waywell, Wilkes]; Waywell, Wilkes 1999, pp. 444-446; Waywell 2002, p. 248. For the Corinthian phase of the theatre see Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, pp. 108-111. The discovery of many architectural fragments in Doric order led scholars to hypothesise «a permanent Doric marble colonnade fronted the movable stage», see Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, pp. 100-103; Waywell, Wilkes 1999, p. 454.

platform of these two early phases was perhaps a wooden construction on uprights.²² S.E.C. Walker underlined the coincidence in date of the gift by the emperor Vespasian with the start of the practice of engraving the names of Spartan officials on the retaining wall of the east *parodos*.²³ The third phase of building work at the theatre, attested at the beginning of the 3rd cent. AD, saw the construction of both a *nymphaeum* in front of the western *parodos* and a new marble *scaenae frons*. A fragment of its architrave bore a dedication to the tetrarchic Caesars Constantine and Maximian (293-305 AD; SEG 11, 850). Perhaps these construction works were carried out due to earthquakes which could have occurred in Sparta on several occasions.²⁴ Two public decrees testify to renovations in 359 supervised by the proconsul Ampelius, and a base with an epigram in his honour was found in the theatre (IG V 1 729).²⁵ The last refurbishment of the *scaenae frons* as evidenced by an inscription engraved on an epistyle took place under Honorius and Theodosius.²⁶

In the early 5th cent. AD, the theatre was incorporated within the late Roman defensive wall that enclosed the acropolis of Sparta.²⁷ It was suggested that after the construction of the wall, the theatre continued to be a place of assembly, albeit in a state of disrepair. This is due to the fact that many blocks of the stage-building and the *cavea* were reused to build the city wall.²⁸ After a period of abandonment and infilling of the orchestra and part of the *cavea*, the theatre area was occupied by

²² Waywell, Wilkes 1999, p. 444.

²³ Waywell, Wilkes, Walker 1998, p. 108. P. Cartledge and A. Spawforth underlined the economic significance of this “epigraphic habit”; Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 96. In Sparta, 170 lists of magistrates were inscribed on *stelai* or public buildings in public spaces such as the *agora*. A third of them was engraved on the wall of the eastern *parodos* and on the slabs of the drain that circled the orchestra in the theatre. Although this practice began under Augustus and continued until the 3rd cent. AD, it flourished under Trajan, Hadrian and Pius. From the Trajanic period, the inscriptions of *cursus honorum* of magistrates began to be inscribed also in the theatre, and according to P. Cartledge and A. Spawforth they had an honorary and political function, i.e. to represent the oligarchy; Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, pp. 144-145.

²⁴ Waywell, Wilkes 1999, p. 444; Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 112; Deligiannakis 2013, p. 125.

²⁵ Feissel, Philippidis-Braat 1985, pp. 285-287, n. 24, 25.

²⁶ Woodward 1928-1930, p. 215, n. 5.

²⁷ Cartledge, Spawforth 2002, p. 115.

²⁸ Waywell, Wilkes 1999, p. 445.

a medieval settlement from the 9th to the early 14th cent. AD and most of the marble seats and some of the *poros* foundations were reused for building purposes.²⁹

The honorific statues of Publius Optatianus and Anatolius

During the Roman period, it was common to set up honorific statues in theatres, and Sparta is an example.³⁰ The archaeological investigations brought to light many statue bases carrying dedications, but it is worth underlining that they were not found *in situ*, except for one; therefore, they could come from elsewhere.³¹ The first to receive such an honour were Lucius (*SEG* 11, 761³²) and Gaius Caesar (*SEG* 11, 762³³), not many years after the building of theatre, probably between 3 BC and 4 AD.³⁴ The theatre in Sparta also housed a statue of the Emperor Hadrian³⁵ as well as of a victorious athlete at Olympia³⁶

²⁹ On the medieval occupation of the theatre see Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995, pp. 445-447, 451-457 [Waywell, Wilkes].

³⁰ Waywell, Wilkes 1999, p. 445.

³¹ Some fragments of honorific statues were found in the theatre: a portrait head of an elderly woman (a priestess?), 160-180 AD; a fragment of a bearded male head, c. 180-210 AD (11323); headless draped female statue, 3rd cent. AD (5105); a life-size male head, 300 AD (4856); a late male portrait-head (3964); a bearded male portrait head, c. 375-400 AD (11322). For the bibliography on the statues found in the theatre see Woodward, Droop, Lamb 1926-1927, pp. 22-32 [Woodward]; Waywell, Wilkes, Powell et alii 1995, pp. 457-460 [Waywell, Wilkes]; Deligiannakis 2013, pp. 125-128; Oikonomou 2014, pp. 26-31.

³² Inv. 2764; H. = 39 cm, W. = 44 cm, D. = 26 cm. Woodward, Hobling 1923-1925, p. 205, n. 3 [Woodward].

³³ Inv. 2793; H. = 47 cm, W. = 50 cm, D. = 20 cm. Woodward, Hobling 1923-1925, p. 206, n. 4 [Woodward].

³⁴ During the same investigations they were found «Small portions of two marble statues, rather over life-size, in particular the left feet, standing with the heels raised from the ground, which clearly formed a pair» and they have been referred to the two honorific statues of the *principes*, Woodward, Hobling 1923-1925, pp. 154, 206 [Woodward]. See also Hanson, Johnson 1946, p. 393, n. 14; Rose 1997, p. 149, n. 81; Sawiński 2015, pp. 85-86.

³⁵ *Arch. Delt* 30, 1975, B', pp. 79-80 [Steinhauer]; Højte 2005, "Hadrian 266", p. 442.

³⁶ Woodward, Robert, Woodward 1927-1928, p. 41, n. 64 [Woodward] (= *SEG* 11, 829): a fragment of a statue base, found east of the stage, records only an ethnic and so it could refer to an athlete.



Fig. 3. Statue base with honorary inscription for Publilius Optatianus (drawing by G. Rignanese).

and above all, circa twenty statues dedicated to illustrious personalities who belonged to the upper class, including many who had held posts in Sparta, particularly in the 2nd and 3rd cent. AD.³⁷

Of all the honorary monuments in the theatre of Sparta, the ones which stand out are the statues of Publilius Optatianus and Anatolius, as they are the only sculptures whose inscriptions indicate where they were erected: that is to say, “near Lycurgus”. Furthermore, the statue base in honour of Anatolius was the only one found *in situ*, at the western angle of the bastion of the eastern outer stairs. This information is crucial for locating the statues of Publilius Optatianus and Lycurgus and speculating on this *ensemble*.

The statue of Publilius Optatianus

The plain base of an irregular shaped greyish marble (fig. 3) in honour of Publilius Optatianus was found, not *in situ*, «at deep level, in 1927, in front of the front seats, near the foot of staircase No. VII».³⁸

³⁷ SEG 11, 778 (P. Augurinus Priferminus Paetus, Trajanic age); IG V 1 483 (Aristokrates son of Kamillos, 1st-2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 776 (C. Iulius Charixenos, 1st-2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 802 (P. Aelius Damokratidas, 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 779 (C. Iulius Eurycles, 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 806 (M. Aurelius Xenarchidas, 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 780 (C. Pomponius Alcastus, 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 498 (C. Iulius Boiotios, 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 627 (Hygeinos son of Hygeinos, second half of the 2nd cent. AD); SEG 30, 407 (group of statues honouring Tib. Claudius Aristocrates, his wife and their son; second half of the 2nd cent. AD); IG V 1 576 (Claudia Damostheneia; end of the 2nd cent. AD); SEG 11, 800 (M. Aurelius Philippus; 2nd-3rd cent. AD); SEG 11, 799 (M. Aurelius Nicephorus; 2nd-3rd cent. AD); SEG 11, 807 (Q. Aufidenus; early 3rd cent. AD); Woodward, Robert, Woodward 1927-1928, n. 57 [Woodward] (C. Pomponius Panthales Diogenes Aristeas; 3rd cent. AD); SEG 11, 803, IG V 1 556 (P. Aelius Alcandridas, 3rd cent. AD); SEG 11, 810 (Publilius Optatianus; 4th cent. AD); SEG 11, 773 (Anatolius; 4th cent. AD).

³⁸ Sparta, Arch. Mus. 2924. H. = 31 (on the left) - 22 (on the right) cm; W. = 84 cm; D. = 47 cm. Woodward, Robert, Woodward 1927-1928, pp. 35-37, n. 58 [Woodward] (*editio*

Ἡ πόλις
 τὸν διὰ πάντων εὐεργέτην καὶ σω-
 τήρα τῆς Λακεδαίμονος, τὸν λαμ(πρότατον) ἀνθ(ύπατον)
 Πουβλίλι(ιον) Ὀππατιανόν, Λυκούργω κατὰ τὸ ἦθος καὶ τὴν
 προᾶξιν ὁμοιοῦσα ἀπ' ἴσων, ἔστησεν παρὰ τῷ Λυκούργω,
 προσδεξαμένου τὸ ἀνάλωμα Μάρ(κου) Αὐρ(ηλίου) Στεφάνου
 τοῦ διασ(ημοτάτου) ἀρχιερέως τῶν Αὐγούστων, τοῦ
 προστάτου τῆς πόλεως.

The city | has erected (a statue of) the benefactor in every way and
 saviour | of Lacedaimonia, the most illustrious proconsul | Publilius
 Optatianus, considering him similar to Lycurgus equally in character
 and | deeds, next to (the statue of) Lycurgus; | undertook the expenses
 Marcus Aurelius Stephanus, | most venerable high priest of the Augusti,
 | chief of the city.³⁹

The text, as is typical of honorary inscriptions from late antiquity, is very brief and only provides essential information: the honorer in nominative, the honorand in accusative and the reason for the dedication, which is, however, so general that it is not possible to identify the honorand's deeds and works.

This inscription is peculiar because it has two honorers: the *polis* in nominative and M. Aurelius Stephanus in genitive absolute. The text only records the rank and a single title of the honorand, whereas in the case of the honorer, his *perfectissimus* rank and his two offices (high priest of the imperial cult and chief of the city) are specified. The presence of two honorers emphasises the cooperation between several spheres in obtaining permission to set up an honorific statue; social and political influence was necessary to overcome many bureaucratic stages and this procedure gave greater prestige to the honorary monument.⁴⁰

The honorand, Publilius Optatianus, has been identified with Porfyrius, a Latin poet, famous for his *carmina figurata* who lived between 3rd and 4th cent. AD.⁴¹ Unfortunately, we do not know

princeps); Roussel 1931, p. 216; *AnnEp* 1931, 6; *SEG* 11, 810; Groag 1946, pp. 25-26; Robert 1948, p. 21; Chastagnol 1962, pp. 80-82, n. 33; Feissel, Philippidis-Braat 1985, pp. 284-285, n. 22; Di Napoli 2007, p. 334, E AA 8; Gehn 2012, LSA-6; Oikonomou 2014, p. 34; Wienand 2017, p. 136.

³⁹ Translation by the author; for other translations see Feissel, Philippidis-Braat 1985, p. 285 (French); Gehn 2012 (English); Wienand 2017, p. 136 (English).

⁴⁰ Wueste 2016, pp. 59-88.

⁴¹ For the bibliography on Optatianus's biography see Wienand 2017, p. 121, n. 2;

anything about his background and family of origin; however, he was a senatorial newcomer.⁴²

Under Maxentius, he was already member of the wealthy senatorial aristocracy, as shown by an inscription (*CIL* VI 41314) found in Rome during the building of the Galleria (today Alberto Sordi) in Piazza Colonna and dated between 306 and 312.⁴³ The text lists the names of seven members of the senatorial *elite*, who according to E. Groag would have been part of a priestly college honoured perhaps for having financed the building or restoration of a public edifice in Rome, perhaps a temple.⁴⁴ However, when the power changed in 312, Optatianus' career came to a halt and stalled for over a decade, unlike that of other aristocrats who had also held posts under Maxentius. He could not rely on a powerful family or a network of clients and connections within the imperial *elite* to claim a term for himself in the ranks of the aristocracy after the regime change; his only weapon was his poetry.⁴⁵

Between 319 and 322, probably in 320 when he was a member of the emperor's *entourage* in Illyricum during the campaign against the Sarmatians, he delivered at least two letters to the emperor containing some of his poems.⁴⁶ However, these epistles aroused little interest on the part of the emperor, who only advised him to continue writing such *carmina*.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Optatianus' attempt to win Constantine's favour perhaps clashed with the rivalry of other aristocrats, which may

Pipitone 2015, pp. 18-21.

⁴² It was suggested to identify Optatianus with Anonymus 12 whose horoscope was reported in Firm. 2, 29, 10-20; *PLRE* I, Anonymus 12, pp. 1006-1008. Although T.D. Barnes had just underlined that this identification was impossible, many scholars accepted this hypothesis attributing the details of Anonymus 12 life to Optatianus; Barnes 1975, p. 174; *contra* Polara 2004, pp. 25-26; Perono Cacciafoco 2011, pp. 20-27; Pipitone 2012, pp. 19-21. For the summary of the question see Wienand 2017, p. 141, n. 71. The also presumed African origin of Optatianus - until recently supported - appears difficult to be confirmed, see Pipitone 2015, p. 19; *contra* Wienand 2017, p. 122, n. 4.

⁴³ Rome, Capitolin Museums, NCE n. 63; Fornari 1917, p. 22. E. Groag was the first to connect the inscription with the life of Optatianus, see Groag 1926-1927, pp. 108-109; Wienand 2017, pp. 141-148 with bibliography.

⁴⁴ Groag 1926-1927.

⁴⁵ Wienand 2017, pp. 122-124.

⁴⁶ According to R. Van Dam, Optatianus send a panegyric poem to Constantine when the emperor entered Rome after the battle at the Milvian bridge, Van Dam 2011, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Wienand 2017, pp. 148-155; on the *epistulae* see also Pipitone 2012-2013.