

The awning apparatus of the theatre at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges

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Introduction

Theatres are complex buildings, both architecturally and technically. Among their components the supporting structures for *vela* (awnings) are particularly difficult to elucidate. Little detailed analysis on such structures exists. Each monument is different, and it is only through case-studies that we can arrive at an understanding of their design. The present note considers the Gallo-Roman theatre at *Lugdunum Convenarum* in the south of France.

The theatre follows the N-S axis of the colline Saint-Bertrand.¹ Built in the late 1st c. B.C. or early 1st c. A.D., it shows an upper earth retaining wall, the outer wall of the *cavea* (its cobble courses run for c.68 m), substructures for the seating, parts of upper access corridors and of one lower corridor, parts of a *vomitorium*, and part of the E *parados*. The central blocks of the seating rest on the rock, while the E and W edges were presumably supported on masonry substructures and arches. The E sector of the *cavea* is partly intact, with two arches (both belonging to the lower entrances to the inner *cavea*) still visible. The orchestra and *scaenae frons* have disappeared. A *porticus post scaenam* is known to have stood behind but its remains are concealed by agriculture.

The post-hole assemblies for the *vela*

The supporting structure for the awning was incorporated into the outer wall of the *cavea*, a fairly rough masonry construction which was up to 1.2 m thick at the base. The wall supports mast sockets (fig. 1). The original excavator, B. Sapène,² located 19 ring stones³ installed on the inner face of the *cavea* wall, and 10 ring stones on the outer face (fig. 2). The locations of the latter correspond to the inner ring stones, at least along the E half of the wall where the inner ones are extant. In his notes, Sapène recorded some of the angles at which the ring stones were installed, and some of the distances between them.⁴ He also produced a section through the upper *cavea* showing his interpretation of the post-holes (fig. 3): in it, the outer and inner post-holes are shown as being 1.20 m apart, with their openings some 0.60 m from the top of what remains of the wall. The inner post-hole is outlined as being slightly less deep than the outer one; both appear capped, presumably by ring stones.

In his important book on *vela*,⁵ R. Graefe used Sapène's reports and generated a summary illustration (without accompanying explanation) that outlined the post-hole assemblies complete with the ring and socket stones (fig. 4). In his figure the outer and inner ring stones are

- 1 On the site as a whole see R. May, *Lugdunum Convenarum: Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges* (Lyon 1996) and J.-L. Paillet and C. Petit, "Nouvelles données sur l'urbanisme de *Lugdunum des Convènes*," *Aquitania* 10 (1992) 109-44. For a detailed description of the theatre and its *porticus post scaenam*, see M. Janon and D. Millette in *Aquitania* 18 (2001-2) 46-51 and iid., "The Gallo-Roman theatre at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (Haute-Garonne): an interim report," *Phoenix* 57 (2003) 317-25.
- 2 B. Sapène carried out excavations around the theatre in the 1920s and 1930s, see his "Rapport sur les fouilles 1929-1930," *Mémoire Soc. Arch. du Midi de la France* 18 (1932) 21-27, esp. 23; the Musée de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges holds his *Carnets de fouilles* (1929-34), his unpublished excavation notes (see esp. pp. 1136-42) and his *Fiches d'inventaire* (1930) (see esp. fiches 83-84 and 108-11).
- 3 By "ring stone" I mean the top stone of the post-hole assembly, into which a post or mast would have been inserted. I use the term "socket stone" for the lower stone where the mast would have rested at the base of the same assembly. cf. R. Graefe, 'Vela erunt'. *Die Zeltdächer der römischen Theater und ähnlicher Anlagen* (Mainz 1979) 219.
- 4 See his fiche 83 (supra n.2).
- 5 Graefe (supra n.3) 41-42, 90, 149, 185 with figs. 39-43.