

# The theatre at Leptis Magna and the development of Roman theatre design

Frank B. Sear

GIACOMO CAPUTO, *IL TEATRO AUGUSTEO DI LEPTIS MAGNA. SCAVO E RESTAURO (1937-1951)* (Monografie di Archeologia Libica III, "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, Roma 1987). Vol.I testo con 148 pagine e 188 tavole illustrate; vol.2 con 23 tavole pieghevoli (I a XXXIX). ISBN 88-7062-612-1. Lit. 450.000.

It is perhaps an understatement to describe this volume as long-awaited. It was scheduled as volume III in the series *Monografie di Archeologia Libica*, and was due to appear about 35 years ago, after Pesce's *Palazzo delle Colonne* (1950) and before the *Tempio di Iside in Sabratha* (1953) by the same author. The series in fact reached volume XIX with Caputo and Ghedini's *Tempio di Ercole di Sabratha* (1984) before *Il teatro augusteo di Leptis Magna* finally appeared. By that time Caputo's *Teatro di Sabratha* (1959) had appeared, as well as *Le sculture del teatro di Leptis Magna* (1976) which he wrote with G. Traversari. With the publication of this book, the theatre at Leptis Magna will join the growing list of important ancient theatres which have finally received detailed documentation. These include the theatre at Bosra<sup>1</sup> and the theatre at Syracuse.<sup>2</sup> Mention should also be made of three remarkable and important recent works: *El teatro en la Hispania romana* (Badajoz 1982), which provides detailed documentation and plans of 15 theatres in the Iberian peninsula; and two books which include much information about theatres in Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> As for North Africa, the theatres have on the whole been well documented, especially the theatre at Sabratha published by Caputo himself, who includes a useful analysis of other theatres in North Africa. The most recent book on the theatres of North Africa, by Jean-Claude Lachaux,<sup>4</sup> does not seem to have come to Caputo's attention, although it is a most valuable one.

## Description and building history of the Leptis theatre

The theatre at Leptis Magna is a monument of fundamental importance. The theatre is not only well preserved, but extremely well documented by inscriptional evidence. Furthermore, much of its fabric dates back to Augustan times and clearly echoes developments at Rome at a time when theatre building was undergoing rapid technological and stylistic change. It is also the second largest theatre in North Africa, with a *cavea* measuring 88.50 m. in diameter. In size it is exceeded only by Sabratha, whose *cavea* has an overall width of 92.60 m., and by Carthage (Caputo in his book on the theatre at Sabratha speaks of the theatre at Hippo Regius as the largest in Africa, with a *cavea* 100 m. wide. However, Marec's plan which he reproduces<sup>5</sup> shows it as only about 53 m. wide, excluding the twoapsed basilical halls which do not form part of the *cavea* proper.)

The theatre of Leptis Magna was dedicated in A.D. 1-2 according to three inscriptions in each of which Annobal Rufus records his building works and his dedication of them (pp.24-28). The *cavea*, which faces northeast, was not built against a slope, like so many North African theatres, or raised on a series of alternately annular and radial vaults, as was the theatre of Marcellus in Rome. Instead the *ima cavea* was cut into the rock and the *media cavea* supported on an *aggestus* supported by an outer wall of solid masonry articulated by pilasters. Five vaulted passageways run through this fill and emerge as *vomitoria* at the level of the lower *praecinctio* (Tavv. XIV and XXXIII). Of the 6 masonry wedges which

1 H. Finsen, *Le levé du théâtre romain à Bosra* (Analecta Romana Instituti Danici 6, Copenhagen 1972).

2 L. Polacco, C. Anti, *Il teatro antico di Siracusa* (Rimini 1981).

3 *Anticki Teatar na tlu Jugoslavije/Antique theater in the territory of Yugoslavia* (Novi Sad 1979) and *Anticki Teatar na tlu Jugoslavije/Théâtre antique sur le sol de la Yougoslavie* (Saopsterija sa naucnog skupa 14-17 April 1980, Novi Sad 1981).

4 *Théâtres et amphithéâtres d'Afrique proconsulaire* (Aix en Provence c.1981).

5 *Il teatro di Sabratha* Tav.88.