

## THE ROMAN THEATRE OF SCYTHOPOLIS

### *The Excavations of 1960-1961*

The excavations of the Roman theatre of Scythopolis (Beth Shean) were carried out between 1960 and 1962 under the auspices of the National Parks Authority (then known as the Society for Landscape Improvement) which financed the work. The excavation was supervised by the Department of Antiquities and Museums of the Ministry of Education of Israel, and directed in 1960 and 1961 by the writer, in 1962 under the supervision of Dr. (now Professor) Avraham Negev, by Shemuel Tamari. The Department of Public Works of the Ministry of Labour furnished labour management, tools, materials and technical equipment.\*

Certain factors have made the composition of a final report no easy task.<sup>1</sup> One has been the inaccessibility of the original key-plan of the

\* Yoḥanan Hevesi very ably conducted the complex excavation of the podium to the south of the theatre during the first season of work, when we also had the assistance of Raphael Salus. Shemuel Tamari was my assistant during the second season. Among the more long-term volunteers were also Eitan Shani, Yehudit Majew, Uggi Iversen, Anne Cocker and Lois Levin, to whom special credit goes for her supervision of Section Vo. 3 and her organization of the enormous bulk of finds. Jaques Suissa was architectural draftsman, and Arieh Volk staff photographer. The following volunteers also earned our thanks: Ina Feltman, M. Davis, Asa Gingerman, Y. Bar Karmi, Yehudit Liechenstein (Lelakh), Rita Antokoletz, Audrey Ellinger, Naḥum Bernard, Magnus Ottosen, Joyce Williams, David Jacobs, Richard Cohen, Mordekhai Enkin, Ophra Benat. Yehoshua Cohen gave great help during the second season. We would also make mention of the participation of the late Ephrat Yeivin.

Dr. (now Professor) Avram Negev deputized for a fortnight during the first season when I was called away by the arrival of my third child.

Special thanks are due to Mr. Misha Reshef of Kibbutz Beth Alpha, who cleaned and reported on the coins.

<sup>1</sup> Preliminary notes on the excavation of the Beth Shean theatre will be found in *IEJ* 10 126-7, 263; 12, 150-1; *RB* vol. 69, 408 f.; *The Beth Shean Valley: The 17th Archaeological Convention*, ed. Y. Aviram, Jerusalem 1962, 71-3 (Heb.); *The Illustrated London News*, 6450, Vol. 242, Mar. 16, 1963, 380-383, with numerous additional photographs. Cf. also *The Encyclopedia of Excavations in Eretz Yisrael*, (Jerusalem 1970), 78 (Heb.).

excavation, which included the grid-division of the area, and of records of the third season of excavation. Nevertheless, the great importance of the project to the archaeology of the Roman and Byzantine periods in this country makes the presentation of some account imperative. What follows is not a comprehensive archaeological report, but an attempt to describe the details of the building as it was revealed, its history and the evidence which enables us to reconstruct its development.

### *General Remarks*

The theatre ranks among the middle group of Roman imperial theatres where size is concerned. Its approximate capacity may have been such as to hold some 8,000 souls. In plan the building belongs to the so-called "western" type of Roman theatre, commonest in Africa, and distinguished by the character of the *scaenae frons*, which generally possesses one large central apse flanked by smaller ones to right and left, a form paralleled at Gerasa South Theatre, Caesarea and Palmyra. The building itself is set into a chalk scarp which drops to the north in the direction of Tell el-Hosn, in this retaining a Greek tradition, like the theatres of Samaria-Sebaste, Aspendus and Cyrrhus. The Beth Shean theatre, nevertheless, was built in close relationship to an overall city scheme, to judge from the fact that its *scaenae frons* (no *scaena* was found) backed directly onto a broad east-west street of identical orientation, which belonged to the city-plan. Thus it would appear that the building of the theatre was part and parcel of a wider replanning of the city in the Severan period.

From an architectural point of view, individual features of the Beth Shean theatre find certain parallels in other theatres of the Empire, chiefly in the eastern provinces. Thus the central apse of the *Scaenae Frons* with its propylon and flanking podia (A)\* has an analogy at Palmyra. The absence or reduction to a minimum of rooms behind the *Scaenae Frons* is without a known analogy in the east, but appears much earlier in the Theatre of Pompey at Rome, thought to have been a copy of the theatre at Mitylene in Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup> The absence of flanking doors (*hospitalia*) in the *scaenae frons*, is virtually unparalleled in the Roman

\* Capital letters are those attached to the corresponding features on the accompanying plan.

<sup>2</sup> M. Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton 1961) 18f.

Empire, but the *scaenae frons* at Caesarea does possess *exedrae* each side of the central *valvae regales*, and the former do not face onto the *cavea* and orchestra,<sup>3</sup> in this resembling the two flanking doors at Beth Shean which, while piercing the eastern and western extensions of the *Scaenae Frons*, were not visible from the *cavea*. It will be suggested that this anomaly is the result of a reduction of plan immediately after the *Scaenae Frons* and its lateral extensions had been completed.

The polygonal pedestals which lined the podium of the theatre's *scaenae frons*, and apparently bore columns which supported the epistyle of the façade's lower portico, find close stylistic parallels in a temple of second-century date at Termessus in Pisidia.<sup>4</sup> The separation of the southern periphery of the *cavea* from the hill into which the building was set, is roughly paralleled in the theatre of Orange in Provence,<sup>5</sup> and will be discussed later. Finally, the peopled scrolls which adorned the friezes of the *scaenae frons* at Beth Shean are present in a number of Roman imperial structures,<sup>6</sup> and will also be considered below. Their nearest known approach in this country appears to be the decorative sculptured friezes of the temple at Qaddesh Naphtali,<sup>7</sup> a town which in Roman times stood under Phoenician influence. Some words concerning the architect who built the Scythopolis theatre will be found at the conclusion of the present paper.

### *The Theatre*

The theatre faced northward; the *cavea* consisted of two series of seats, the upper and lower, divided from one another by a gangway or *praecinatio* which circled the entire *cavea* from one side to the other. The precise number of seating-tiers in the upper part is unknown; the lower part possessed thirteen. The upper and the lower *cavea* were divided radially into eight segments (*cunei*) by nine staircases ascending from the lowest limit of the lower *cavea* to the *praecinatio*, from which

<sup>3</sup> A. Frova, *Scavi di Caesarea Maritima*, (Milan 1965) 129, fig. 147; p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> D.S. Robertson, *Handbook of Greek and Roman Architecture*,<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1945) 228, fig. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, 279. (n. 4).

<sup>6</sup> See J.M.C. Toynbee, J.B. Ward-Perkins, "Peopled Scrolls. A Hellenistic Motif in Imperial Art", *PBSR*, ns. 18 (1950) 1 ff. and 121 ff.

<sup>7</sup> C.R. Conder, H.H. Kitchener, *Survey of Western Palestine*, I (London 1881-3) 226 ff.

short lateral flights of steps gave access to the upper seats. Each of the seven intermediate staircases of the lower *cavea* was orientated southward upon one of the elliptical cells or *tholoi* built into the body of the upper *cavea* ( $\mu$ ); these were connected with arrangements for entering and leaving the theatre, and something will be said of them below. The lowest tier of the lower *cavea* was separated from the orchestra by a broad beautifully paved footway (the *balteus*) that circled the orchestra from side to side ( $\delta$ ). Abutted upon it from the north at a lower level was a nearly continuous marble bench which, it is to be assumed, accommodated people of distinction, probably the magistrates and *boulé* of the city of Scythopolis. The *balteus* was equipped with a series of regularly-spaced square sinkings ( $\delta$ ) whose ledges showed that they could be closed by stone covers, one of which was found; there were twenty-one such sinkings and they probably provided for the uprights of a wooden trellis or balustrade which could be set in place or removed according to need. In addition a number of smaller rectangular sinkings had been cut at various points in the seating, and their use can only be conjectured; they may have held wooden blocks into which iron cleats or bollards were sunk for belaying the ropes which regulated the awnings stretched to protect the audience.

The orchestra was floored with marble slabs set upon a layer of field-stones, and drained by a channel which caught the runoff from the *cavea* and directed it into an underground cistern at the foot of the *pulpitum* or stage-front.

The principal ceremonial entrances (*versurae*) of the theatre led into the orchestra from the east and the west directly in line with and in front of the stage, passing through vaulted passages in the ends of the *cavea*. Parallel with these and to the north of them, a secondary vaulted passage entered the halls or *basilicae* which flanked each end of the *proscenium* or stage. These latter passages were further accessible from the north, i.e. from the street which bounded the *scaenae frons* in that direction, by north-south passages along the east and west limit of the theatre. Between these and the flanking halls or *basilicae*, and bounded on the south by the secondary east-west vaulted entrances, a spiral staircase contained in a circular well led up from groundlevel at each end to the upper storey of the *basilicae*. While this feature is paralleled in other known Roman theatres, for example at Aspendus in Pamphylia,

roughly contemporary with the Beth Shean building, — at the former the lateral staircases are built in rectangular stair-wells or towers.<sup>8</sup>

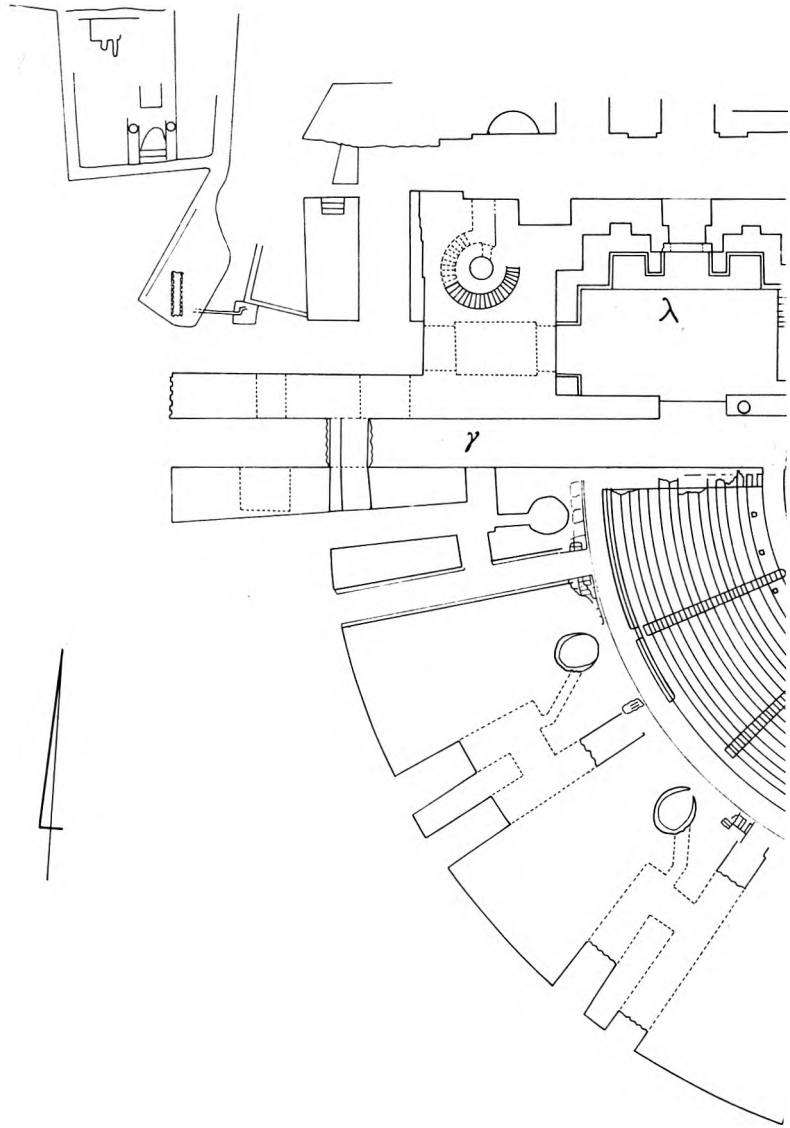
The *basilicae* on each flank of the stage seem to have been originally designed as an integral part of the stage-area, since the podium fronting the *scaenae frons* extended into each of them; their north walls were pierced by ceremonial entrances from the north, each flanked, in the wall above the podium, by niches in which statues had probably stood. On the south, the *basilicae* opened onto the entrance-passages between the *versurae* and the ends of the *cavea* through a columned portico set on the line of the *pulpitum* or stage-front.

The stage or *proscenium* was fronted, as in most Roman theatres, by the *pulpitum*, a retaining wall whose marble-encrusted face presented a series of niches alternately rectangular and semicircular. Immediately behind it ran an east-west vaulted subterranean passage, the *hyposcenium*, divided into sections of varying length by voussoired arches the crowns of which remained below the level of the stage. Its width varied, but the average was about 1.50 m. Descent to this tunnel was provided by stairs set in the stage, reaching it from the north both at its extreme east and west limits and at its centre. Judging by parallels, more particularly by that of the theatre of Syracuse,<sup>9</sup> the subterranean passage, which was a late feature in the history of the Beth Shean theatre, contained the machinery for lowering and raising the sectional curtain (*siparium*) in front of the stage, and a stone slab found at the east end of the passage contained a square opening into which a mast, one of a number necessary for such machinery, could have been stepped.

The *scaenae frons* of the theatre, its main decorative feature, is preserved up to the level of the lintel of the central door or *valva regalis* (θ). It rose from a podium some 2.15 m. in height, which, returning northward each side of the *valva regalis*, to form a great apse, projected into the theatre an additional three metres each side of the entrance, in order to furnish the bases on which stood, to left and right, pairs of great granite columns which carried the epistyle of the majestic propylon

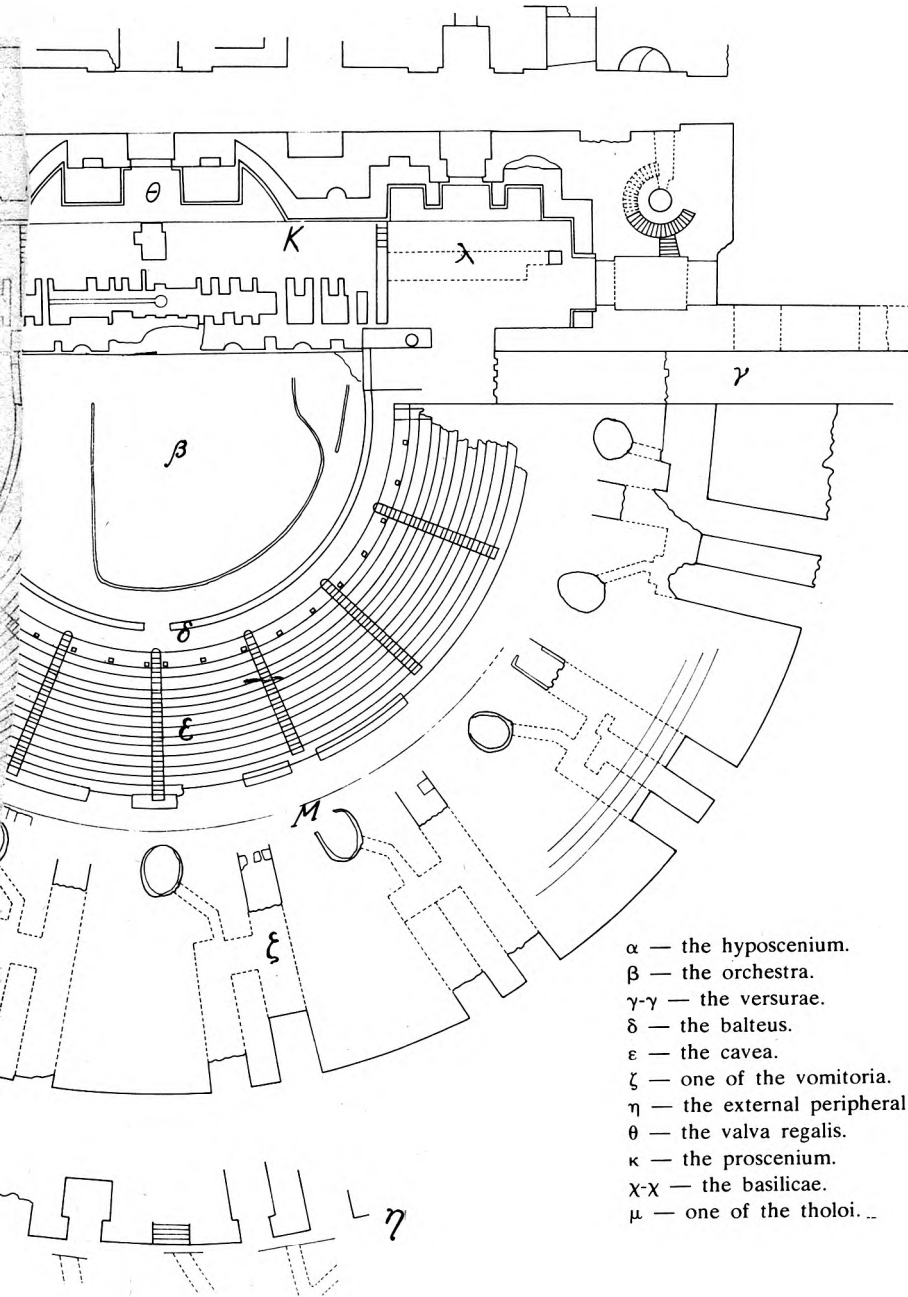
<sup>8</sup> A spiral staircase within a circular well existed in the south-western corner of the cella of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, built as early as 32 CE. Cf. A. Boethius, J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth 1970) 455.

<sup>9</sup> Bieber, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 179–180; G.E. Rizzo, *Il Teatro di Siracusa* (1923) 64, 73, 78 and 49 ff.



BETH SHEAN  
The Roman Theatre

0 5 10 15 m  
SCALE



- α — the hyposcenum.
- β — the orchestra.
- γ-γ — the versurae.
- δ — the balteus.
- ε — the cavea.
- ζ — one of the vomitoria.
- η — the external peripheral wall.
- θ — the valva regalis.
- κ — the proscenium.
- χ-χ — the basilicae.
- μ — one of the tholoi.

spanning the entrance within the théâtre. Behind and above each of these podia the upper wall of the *scaenae frons* threw forward piers from whose sides projected the jambs of the ceremonial gate and in each of which a rectangular frontal niche had been inserted. Along the front of the podium of the *scaenae frons* to east and west, was ranged, as stated, a series of octagonal bases upon which lesser columns carried the epistyle of the lower storey of the façade. So far as could be judged from the architectural finds, which came chiefly from the foot of the *scaenae frons* and from the south-west quadrant of the orchestra, where they had been systematically concentrated after dismantling in the Arab period, the porticoes of both storeys of the *scaenae frons* were of the Corinthian order. The three ornamental doors piercing the façade were rendered in a style first found at Rome in the Flavian period, but widespread in a peculiar baroque development at Rome, in North Africa and in the eastern provinces, especially in the later 2nd and 3rd centuries (D). Among typical examples in the Beth Shean theatre was a white marble cornice with successive astralagus and leaf decoration, followed below by a moulding, then by a series of consols embellished by acanthi surrounded by other foliage, and alternating with a quadrupal leaf or blossom; below this came a band of peltae or plant-motifs, then, successively, dentillations and an ovolo. The jambs of the doors appear to have been adorned in a kindred style. Most notable, however, were the limestone friezes which supported the cornices of the epistyles (E); these had been carved in one piece with the architrave, which was divided into fasciae by two rows of bead and reel motifs, and separated from the frieze by a pulvinated band enriched with balls set between crescents, and lozenges below a band of fleurs-de-lis and palmettes. The frieze itself bore a peopled scroll of acanthus in high relief, among whose interstices appeared various human and animal figures — genii, putti, a griffin, a lion, a bull and a dog pursuing a sheep (F).

In front of the *scaenae frons* were found a great bronze door-hinge which had belonged to the central *valva regalis*, a large lead butterfly cramp doubtless tying two masonry blocks of the rear wall, and other pigs of lead from which similar cramps were presumably to have been made.

In addition to its decorative architectural format and sculptural embellishments in carving and relief, the façade of the *scaenae frons* was



elaborately adorned with an encrustation of *opus sectile*, i.e. of slabs of various types of coloured stone cut to various shapes and sizes in order to be fitted into a gay and variegated pattern. With them are probably to be associated a number of bronze cramps found in front of the Scaenae Frons. Exactly how and where this decoration was applied cannot be stated with certainty. Most of the fragments of the *opus sectile* were found in squares F9, G8, 9, 12, 13, 14 and J11, 12, and of these F and G contributed the bulk of the specimens; they coincided with the area of the *proscenium*, that is, the area directly in front of the Scaenae Frons. The colours of the fragments recorded were cream, grey, yellow with red and grey mottling, white-yellow, apricot, yellow and red-purple (probably porphyry). Stratigraphical considerations, i.e. the finding of fragments of *opus sectile* in strata connected with the period of the theatre's decay subsequent to the 3rd century CE,<sup>10</sup> suggest that the *opus sectile* encrustation of the Scaenae Frons belonged to the theatre as it was originally built.<sup>11</sup>

The general ensemble of the *scaenae frons*, with its two-storeyed Corinthian porticoes possessing columns of white and possibly green Cippolino marble, centred on two pairs of red granite column-shafts fronting the propylon of the *valva regalis*, — its carved door-jamb and epistyles of white marble, set behind a white marble-encrusted *pulpitum*, all contrasted with darker limestone members, and more particularly with the elaborately decorated limestone entablatures whose friezes bore deep-cut acanthus scrolls from among whose foliage appeared semi-divine and animal figures — all this must have created a grandiose if not a garish impression, the more so since the whole formed an elaborate frame to the numerous statues (doubtless painted) placed within the porticoes, and to the polychrome *opus sectile* revetments which probably

<sup>10</sup> Eg. a tongue-shaped piece of *opus sectile* found at the very bottom of the *hyposcenium* (G/H X), which was erected in its present form in the later 4th century CE, but may have been preceded by an earlier structure.

<sup>11</sup> The decay and destruction of the *scaenae frons* was also graphically illustrated by the finding of a dismembered marble statue — apparently of Ptolemy III — in the north-eastern exedra of the theatre's western *basilica*. (See here Appendix II). It had been buried just above the level of the original pavement, here already fragmentary, in the clay fill supporting a tile floor which was associated with a late wall inserted some 40 cm. above the original pavement and closing off the north section of the exedra. Unfortunately no secure dating material was found in these strata.

encrusted the face of the wall and niches glimpsed between the intercolumniations of the porticoes. Furthermore, glass and coloured tesserae found in the *hyposcaenium* area may well have adorned the uppermost part of the *scaena frons*.

Access to and exit from the *praecinctio* of the theatre was provided by the *vomitoria*, vaulted passages passing radially through the body of the upper *cavea* and communicating with an external alley-way cut in the chalk scarp; this alley encircled the south side of the theatre and its outer limit was defined by a peripheral wall which will be described presently (G). The *vomitoria* (H), eight in number, were double and parallel, but in each case the westerly of the pair (the northerly in the west of the theatre, the southerly in its east) did not reach the *praecinctio* but turned through a right angle to rejoin the other, before the latter debouched within the theatre. Clearly therefore, only the easterly "through" passage was used for entry, and the westerly would have been opened to relieve pressure when the public left the theatre. (The whole arrangement is an illuminating commentary on the undisciplined temperament of Scythopolitan audiences in the 3rd century of the current era). The westerly passage seems, however, to have discharged an additional function. In each case at the point where it turned to rejoin the second "through" passage, another narrow passage, less than a metre wide, left it at an angle to communicate with one of the nine *tholoi* (I) already alluded to, each of which was thus connected with one of the *vomitoria*.<sup>12</sup> These *tholoi* were elliptical chambers, apparently, at least at a later stage, without access to the *praecinctio*, and the problem of their use has given rise to numerous conjectures, nearly all unsatisfactory, some comic, and one or two obscene.<sup>13</sup> The one reasonable suggestion came from the late Professor Lauer-Belart during his visit to the site in 1967; his opinion was that each *tholos* gave access northward to a stair on the *praecinctio* which led to the upper *cavea*. He further suggested that the *tholoi* originally possessed flat roofs providing prominent seating for the *honoratiores* of the *peregrini* who occupied the *summa cavea*, and to this steps gave access. This suggestion is supported,

<sup>12</sup> Exceptional was the easternmost *vomitiorium*, no. 1, which communicated with the eastern *versura* by an additional lateral passage, to which the eighth *tholos* was attached.

<sup>13</sup> Among the more entertaining of these suggestions the following may be enumerated: dens for the lions; refreshment-bars; for the relief of nature; *lupanaria*.

at least in one case, by the presence of steps ascending to the upper *cavea* next to the *tholos*.<sup>14</sup> It should be added that only one approximate parallel to the Beth Shean *tholoi* is known to me among the theatres of the Roman Empire.<sup>15</sup>

The theatre was surrounded on its south side by an external peripheral wall (G), already mentioned; this wall, excellently built, possessed internal buttresses and openings opposite the "through" *vomitoria*. Opposite *Vomitorium* no. 3, where a section (Vo. 3) was cut producing the line of the *vomitrium* outside the theatre, the approach between the gate in the peripheral wall and the threshold of the *vomitrium* was found to be closed off on each side by a wall at least 2 m. high. Later examination in the third season of work showed that steps ascended the peripheral wall from the north, inner side, at given points, and it would seem that radial bridges had originally joined the top of the wall with the upper *cavea* of the theatre, thus affording access without the need to use the *vomitoria* and the stairs in the interior of the theatre, a fact which would explain why the *tholoi* were later blocked off from the *praecinctio* within the theatre.

South of the theatre, between the *cavea* and the external peripheral wall, and opposite *Vomitorium* 5, was found a late masonry structure definable as a podium (J). Oblong in plan, it was orientated roughly north-south, and its function was difficult to define. It can only be said, in the light of the finds, which included a number of clay votive figurines, that at some stage it possessed religious associations, and the structure was enlarged and perpetuated, albeit crudely, down to the end of the Byzantine and into the Arab period. It is possible that the podium also served as the pier of a bridge that gave access to the top of the *cavea*, but if so, this was at a comparatively late date. Its earliest

<sup>14</sup> Changes were certainly made in ancient times in the structures connected with the podium of the upper *cavea* where it meets the *praecinctio*. As a case in point may be cited the underpinning of the jamb of one of the western *vomitoria* where it debouches upon the *praecinctio*, by a reused fragmentary architrave. Furthermore, if the *tholoi* once gave access to the *praecinctio*, all were later blocked off from it, presumably when ascent to the *summa cavea* was afforded by stairs from outside the theatre on the south.

<sup>15</sup> Autun, in Gaul. — A. Grenier, *Manuel des antiquités préhistoriques, celtiques et gallo-romaines*, 3 (Paris 1958) 800, fig. 262. Of this feature Grenier writes (p. 801): "À droite, au dessus de la première précinctio, se trouve une loge à laquelle devait conduire un escalier partant du mur qui borde l'entrée." It is thought (*ibid.*) to date from the reign of Vespasian.

phase was certainly a good deal later than the first building of the theatre, and the general chronological problem will be discussed below.

### *The History of the Theatre*

The date of the first building of the theatre was established by excavation down to the exterior footing of the peripheral wall surrounding it on the south. The wall and the theatre are not necessarily contemporary, but confirmatory evidence that they were came from finds below the podium, from Section Vo. 3, from *Vomitorium* 4, from the orchestra and from the *hyposcenum*. The coins recovered from the fill accumulated against the south side of the peripheral wall were of the late 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, and the pottery was uniformly of that date. A coin of Constantius II (337–361) found against the tenth lowest course of the wall seemed to contradict this conclusion, but was suspect as having been planted, and should be disregarded.<sup>16</sup> The contemporaneity of the wall and the theatre was proved beyond doubt by the fact that in Section Vo. 3 the lowest level was the roadway leading from the gate in the peripheral wall into and through the *vomitorium*, and the strata immediately over it yielded 3rd-century pottery, also coins of Geta, Alexander Severus and Philip II (247–49 CE), but none of later date. While a good deal of the stratification which had blocked all the *vomitoria* did not precede the early Arab period, and all of them were used for habitation during most of that epoch, Severan pottery was found at the level of the original roadway in *Vomitorium* 4. In the orchestra too Arab disturbance was evident down to the foundation under the orchestra pavement, and although the majority of the coins found in the area (54) were Byzantine or Arab, three were of the 3rd century CE. Similarly, although the *hyposcenum* appears to have been built in the 4th century CE, pockets of Severan pottery in its western half (G–vii, viii; B–xi) suggested that it had been preceded by an earlier structure along the same line. Finally, the floor (F4) marking the earliest phase of the podium outside and to the south of the theatre (J), abutted against the peripheral wall, being therefore later than it, and sealed Severan potsherds.

<sup>16</sup> It was found by a worker precisely on the day when the award of bonuses for coin-finds was announced, and very shortly after the announcement.

The last observation permits us to revert to the date of the same podium and its successors. F4, the floor belonging to the earliest structure, represented levelling up at a time when *Vomitorium* 5 was already partly blocked with rubbish; it sealed coins of Alexander Severus and Claudius Tacitus (275/6 CE). A drainage channel constructed between the north end of the podium and *Vomitorium* 5, on the other hand, was associated with pottery dating to the second half of the 5th century CE, its type being accurately dated by corresponding wares stratified with coins in the "West Gate" area; the channel overlay a stratum containing 4th-century coins, including probably some of Constantius II (328–61 CE). The strata above it were much disturbed, but it was thought that the podium foundation overlay this drain. However, in view of the fact that the floor of the second structure above the podium (F3), constituting an extension further southward on a slightly different axis, sealed coins of Constantius II, and was later superseded by a third extension southward whose floor (F2) conspicuously lacked the pottery types dated 450–500 CE in the "West Gate" area, and therefore probably antedated the middle of the 5th century, it seems probable that the podium's foundation could not have originally overlain the drainage channel to north of it, and as there was clear stratigraphical evidence in section that the channel had been put down at the bottom of a trench dug from above for the purpose, it may well have been in the course of this work that 4th/5th-century coins and pottery found their way below the same channel. When F2 was built (5th century), the surrounding area was levelled up to a yard composed of gravel chips. The last phase of the podium was another addition over F2, confined to the south half of its predecessor; its floor sealed Arab coins and pottery.

The *Vomitioria*, as stated, were all used as living quarters from the Arab conquest, and Arab pottery was found among the remnants of the road-metalling. In *Vomitorium* 4, however, a coin dating c. 395–405 in less than medium condition from 5 centimetres below the level of the *praecinctio* showed that by the early 5th century the roadway was in a ruinous state.

In Section Vo. 3, which continued the roadway of *Vomitorium* 3 outside the theatre, Arab penetration had reached as far down as Stratum VII; 4th-century and Byzantine coins here prevailed from

Stratum VI upwards. Very marked was the amount of building débris, consisting of roof-tiles, fragments of mosaic pavement, tesserae, bricks, box-tiles and pottery, in Strata III–VI, indicating a period of decay and perhaps destruction, also of clearing up, in the vicinity of the theatre between the 4th and 5th centuries. It is notable that this débris had filled the robber-trench from which the north-east delimiting wall of the entrance road to the *vomitorium* had been removed, showing that the entrance had been in an abandoned state in the 4th century, when 1.30 m. of earth had accumulated over the road and inside the *vomitorium*.

Finds of coins on the seats of the lower *cavea* commenced with Elagabalus, but five were Byzantine down to the 7th century; two were Arab.

It has already been stated that Arab coins and pottery penetrated to below the orchestra's marble paving, which had become ruinous by the mid-6th century. The pavement itself, nevertheless, was shown to be late by the portion which survived in front of the *pulpitum*, and covered the subterranean cistern in front of it. This section embodied a reused fragment of inscription certainly of Byzantine date; 5th-century pottery was also recovered from the vicinity and level of the channel (J3) that drained the orchestra. In spite of all this, the orchestra revealed a fairly regular stratification over the layer of boulders and field-stones that composed the foundation of the orchestra paving. Brown soil (I) was followed below by a dark compact layer, evidently the product of a period of human movement (II), then came another layer of brown soil (III) overlying a deeper stratum of dark brown to black soil with ample organic matter (IV) containing much masonry débris and resting upon the boulder footing (V) of the orchestra pavement upon which, in the south-west quadrant of the area, a number of architectural members, robbed from the *scaenae frons*, had been systematically laid out in the Arab period. The pavement footing rested on a sandy yellow subsoil (VI). Three 3rd-century coins were associated with Stratum V, but the largest group of coins, commencing with Constans, (333–350 CE) and extending to Arab times, penetrated below VI. Distinctive were the groups comprising (1) issues of Constantius II (323–361), Constans (333–50) and Arcadius (395–408); (2) Justin I (518–27) six; Justin II (565–78) two; and Anastasius (491–527). These may be seen as evidence for renewals of activity in the theatre first in the earlier 5th, afterwards

in the 6th century, and both groups were supported by others, not so closely datable, belonging respectively to the 3rd and 4th (twenty-four coins) and 6th or 7th centuries of the present era (fifteen coins).

The above evidence found further support in the numerous coin-finds derived from sections cut in the fill of the *hyposcenum*. The fill of the passage could be divided into two parts, an upper and a lower (Strata IVA–V and VII–VIII respectively, reading from top to bottom). They were separated by VI, which contained much masonry débris and also *opus sectile* from the *scaenae frons*. Byzantine coins were found in both sections, but 6th-century coins were confined to the upper strata; those below included coins as late as the 5th, and two occurred in the lowest stratum. On the other hand IVA, V contained quantities of sherds of the type dated by coins to the second half of the 5th century in the strata belonging to Byzantine dwellings built over the West Gate of the theatre when the latter was in a state of delapidation and disuse. Together with these sherds a number of fragments of glass polycandelia were encountered. It would therefore seem that the *hyposcenum*, first constructed in its present form in the later 4th century, was used between 450–500 as a domestic rubbish dump, but that some time in the 6th century, possibly in the reign of Justin (518–27), six of whose coins came from the orchestra area, it was reconditioned, and a water-channel was inserted in its western half. This contained a 4th–5th century coin in bad condition, while another was extracted from its masonry, in which a third-century statue-torso had been incorporated. With this installation may be connected a channel which brought water to the theatre through *Vomitorium* 8 in the south-west quadrant of the theatre,<sup>17</sup> also a water-pipe which was traced along the north wall of the southern passage of the western *versura*, and the blocking of the same *versura* at its east (interior) end with vertical slabs whose joints were rendered waterproof by hydraulic cement. It seems probable that these installations represented the conversion of the theatre for the performance of water-ballets and similar spectacles.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The course of this channel, which was not traced outside the theatre, is likely to have been represented farther to the south-west by a previously existent Arab watermill (now demolished) which was fed by a leat flowing on a south-west–north-east axis.

<sup>18</sup> See G. Traversarsi, *Gli spettacoli in aqua nel teatro tardo-antico*, Rome 1960.

At this point another late feature must be mentioned, namely, a rectangular masonry platform (B), about 1.60 m. square and 65 cm. high, which had been placed near the central north-south axis of the theatre, in line with the central *gradinatio* of the lower *cavea*, on the paved gangway at the foot of the seats (L10). The significance and function of this structure is unknown; the soil round it was saturated with coins running from the late 2nd or 3rd century CE to the Arab period, although the vast majority were Byzantine, the latest being of Mauritius Tiberius (582–602). They were associated with several dice.<sup>19</sup> The cornice of the seats (row no. 14) above the podium possessed rectangular recesses cut into it at a later date to left and right of the podium, probably for an iron railing which had enclosed the structure. Furthermore, the pavement at the foot of the marble curial bench below the *balteus* had been covered in the Arab period by a rough footwalk composed chiefly of marble fragments, including the complete marble cover of one of the sinkings existent in the *balteus* above it. This footwalk, which approached the podium from each side round the circumference of the orchestra, to afford access to the podium, was dated by the finding of Arab pottery between the footwalk and the footing of fieldstones upon which the marble curial bench was founded. The vertical distance between the footing and the footwalk was some 18 cm.

Other additions in the Arab period were the persistence of occupation in the Byzantine houses built over the West Gate, the erection of a small but strong building over the north-west corner of the theatre — probably a small fort (Locus 200), and of other habitations over the eastern part of the *scaenae frons*. As already stated, all the *vomitoria* served, from the beginning of the Arab period, as habitations. Probably contemporarily the opening in the peripheral wall opposite *Vomitorium* 3 was blocked, and against the inner side of the peripheral wall in its western quadrant a very rough additional wall was built. During the

<sup>19</sup> Indirect light may perhaps be thrown upon the peculiar association of gaming dice with an apparently religious monument, by the fact that on the Feast of Fools, the clerics of Paris, among various other unorthodox deviations, ate "black puddings at the altar itself, while the celebrant is saying mass. They play dice on the altar." (This feast was formally forbidden by the Ecumenical Council of Basel in 1445). — C.G. Coulton, *Mediaeval Panorama* (Cambridge 1938) 606–7.



Arab occupation and down to the Mandatory period, moreover, the orchestra of the theatre served as a midden and by the 20th century had filled up to the level of the *praecinctio*. Layers of black peaty soil in the fill, some well over the level of the podium fronting the *scaenae frons*, were the result of the free flow of water into the orchestra area over the *cavea*.

The fortlet at Locus 200 alone could be approximately dated; it overlay a stratum containing five Arab coins of the 7th to the 10th centuries CE. The dwelling on the east part of the *scaenae frons* also yielded coins, the earliest of which were Ummayyid.

### Summary

The theatre was built in the Severan period, presumably as part of the urban rehabilitation which characterized that epoch in the province of Syria-Palaestina, and is exemplified at Sebaste, Antipatris and perhaps at Hippos-Susita.<sup>20</sup> Yet during the theatre's actual erection, after the *scaenae frons* and its wings had been completed, a drastic reduction of the size of the stage, *cavea* and orchestra seems to have been effected; this, at any rate, is the only reasonable explanation of the fact that the *hospitalia* or flanking doors or the *scaenae frons* did not face the audience, so leaving the *valva regalis* without its otherwise invariable flanking entrances. It is more than possible that higher imperial authority checked the original grandiose plan of the theatre in the interests of urban economy. Notwithstanding, by the end of the 3rd century the theatre was in a ruinous state; the *vomitoria* had begun to

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the present writer in *The Ancient Historian and his Materials*, Essays in honour of C.E. Stevens, ed. B. Levick (1975) 59 ff. — Hellenistic Cities of Judaea and its Vicinity — some New Aspects: especially p. 66, where he has suggested that the decay of Antipatris and Samaria between the later 1st and late 2nd centuries, as demonstrated by excavation, was the result of overurbanization. The Severi may have renewed the urbanization process; whether the later 3rd-century decline was entirely a product of the general crisis of the Empire, or of unbalanced urban development, remains to be seen. But we may note Gerasa's enormous and unproductive building activity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and the presence in the same city in the 3rd century of an imperial *logistes*, presumably sent to bring the civic finances under control. (*SEG*, VII, 826). Gerasa's decline began in the 3rd century, but there was a recovery under Diocletian which continued till the third quarter of the 6th century, when many of the city's buildings were in a state of decay.

fill up with rubbish and the *opus sectile* revetments of the *scaenae frons* to disintegrate, perhaps owing to the vandalism of robbers. A rehabilitation probably began in the later 4th century, although the evidence from Section Vo. 3 suggested that the 4th and 5th centuries beheld damage and decay in the surrounding city. The outer peripheral wall was buttressed and perhaps to the same phase belonged the second podium outside *Vomitorium 5* and the stairs communicating from the wall to the *summa cavea*, since the *vomitoria* may have been blocked. But if we are to judge from the evidence in the *hyposcenum*, the revival was shortlived, and the theatre was again out of use in the second half of the 5th century, when houses had been built over the western *versura* and their inhabitants were using the *hyposcenum* as a domestic rubbish dump. Even before that the *vomitorium* roadways had been pulled up and the marble floor of the orchestra disrupted. A second phase of activity perhaps began in the reign of Justin I (518–27 CE), when new arrangements were made to supply the theatre with water and the orchestra was apparently readapted for water-performances. The building may have been in use down to the early years of the 7th century.

After that the theatre swiftly lost its public character. Yet there were two interesting expressions of continuity. Access to the late masonry podium at the foot of the *cavea* was maintained, as if it still remained an object of attraction or reverence; and the last successor of the masonry podium outside *Vomitorium 5* was renewed after the Arab conquest. Evidently we still have much to learn of the age of transition between Byzantine and Islamic rule in this country.

Finally, it is possible to say something about the man who probably built the Severan theatre. He was one Abselemos son of Zedokomos; he dedicated an altar to Tyche (Good Fortune) and identified himself in the inscription as an οἰκοδόμος (builder).<sup>21</sup> The altar was found at the bottom of the *hyposcenum*; as the latter was built in the 4th century, the pedestal, put down into it and therefore obsolete, must have belonged to the previous Severan phase, i.e. to the original theatre. Despite the resemblance of the name to Absalom, neither his dedication to Tyche nor his father's name, suggests that he was a Jew. Both his

<sup>21</sup> See no. 13 of the inscriptions published in this number of *Scripta Classica Israelica*, p. 139.

name and his father's are Semitic, and Abselemos is likely to have originated in Syria, possibly from the region of Bashan or Hauran, where several builders bearing Semitic names are recorded by inscriptions.<sup>22</sup>

It will be recalled that his theatre possesses features paralleled at Palmyra and Qaddesh Naphtali, but also at Mitylene and Termessos. The peopled scrolls (see further Appendix I) of the *scaenae frons*, on the other hand, possessed affinities with work already being architecturally applied in Syria in the later 2nd century CE, and the technique of some of the sculptured figures recalls Nabataean sculpture. It may therefore be stated that while the theatre as a whole belongs to an architectural medium common throughout the eastern Empire, elements were present that reflect specifically eastern Syrian influence, in conformity with the probable environment of Abselemos, whether he was the building's chief architect or merely one of its executants, nor would it be inappropriate to recall that Apollodorus of Damascus was one of the Empire's outstanding architects and engineers in the first half of the 2nd century.

#### Appendix I.

##### *The Peopled Scrolls of the Theatre of Scythopolis*

The "peopled scrolls" adorning the friezes of the *scaenae frons* of the theatre of Scythopolis belong to a motif originally developed by the minor arts of the eastern Mediterranean in the Hellenistic period. It is first used architecturally in Roman art in the time of Augustus, but only comes to full expression in the Flavian period when putti and animals appear amongst the scrolls, as in Domitian's palace on the Palatine and in the Temple of Venus Genetrix. Griffins first occur in this context in the Forum of Trajan. The motif then undergoes an eclipse, where major architecture is concerned, until the age of Severus, when it revives with great impetus, being utilized in Severus' remodelling of the Domus Palatina, in the Baths of Caracalla and in various buildings at Lepcis

<sup>22</sup> In Syria, the words *οικοδομήθη*, *οικοδόμησαι*, *οικοδόμησεν* etc. are frequent in inscriptions recording the erection of buildings (e.g. *SEG*, I, 550; 7, 160; 19, 889). In at least one case (*SEG*, 8, 255) the verb cannot mean that the dedicator was himself the technical builder. *Οικοδομοι* are referred to in *SEG*, 18, 610 and 19, 230. The word *ἀρχιτέκτων* occurs in *SEG*, 1, 516; 7, 155 and 20, 330.

Magna. All this was certainly a conscious revival of the Flavian motif, but the rendering is different, being characterized by a strong undercutting of the foliage of the scrolls, which creates a flat lacelike impression against a deep black background. Among known examples of this period in Rome, putti and griffins appear, e.g. on the Palatine and at the Grotte Vaticane.

According to Ward-Perkins and Professor Jocelin Toynbee,<sup>23</sup> this motif as a whole was originally evolved in the eastern Mediterranean; they agree that while the style existed in Tripolitania before the Severi, the Severan examples at Lepcis were the work of sculptors called from Aphrodisias in Caria. The style is seen in evolution in the 2nd century at Lepcis, Aspendus and Ankara. In Syria it is found in the 2nd century at Ba'albeq, 'Atil (151 CE) and at Palmyra.

Nevertheless, I would have little hesitation in dating most of the peopled scrolls at the Beth Shean theatre as Severan; the scrolls and leafage are essentially flat, although the foliage of some sections of the frieze displays fine rhythm and plasticity, and the griffin appearing amid the acanthus medallions is able and energetic. All the surviving animals, indeed, elicit an energy of movement lacking in the western parallels with which I am acquainted. A considerable variation of artistic ability is also noticeable in the execution of the schematized palmettes dividing the architrave from the frieze.

The closest parallel to the Beth Shean work that I can find among the illustrations of Toynbee and Ward-Perkins is the Sabrata fragment (*ib.* p. 40 and pl. xxvi, 1), which they date as not before the middle of the 2nd century.

Although the Beth Shean epistyles are to be evaluated in their own right, stylistically they can be said to confirm the other archaeological evidence of the date of the theatre's original construction.

## Appendix II

### *The Statue from the Western Basilica of the Stage Area*

The circumstances in which the above statue was found are briefly outlined in a footnote (fn. 11) on p. 83. An account and discussion of

<sup>23</sup> See Toynbee, Ward-Perkins, *loc. cit.* (n. 5) on which survey the present brief account of the "peopled scrolls" motif is based.

the find were published in the *Annual of Museum Ha-Aretz* (Tel Aviv), vol. XIII, (1971), pp. 11 ff. (Heb.) and pp. 14 ff. (Eng.), to which the reader is referred for a full description of the figure. It was there concluded that the head, which is earlier than the torso, elicits the influence of Praxiteles and Scopas, but showed the strongest affinity with the Agias of Lysippos (flor. 328 BCE). The closest known parallel is a head from Ialysos, Rhodes, of which the Beth Shean is a copy, unless both are derived from a common source. The head, after it had been hacked from the torso (possibly when Hyrcanus I took Scythopolis in the last decade of the 2nd century BCE) was recovered and the new body made for it, probably in the Roman period, when it was placed in the theatre as a museum piece.

Since the above publication, continued study of the statue has enabled the addition of some further conclusions, which have been briefly alluded to in another paper by the present writer. (*The Ancient Historian and his Materials*, Essays in honour of C.E. Stevens, ed. B. Levick, [Harmondsworth 1975] 66–7, 72 nn. 60, 61).

A tiny replica of the above head is to be found in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, and is adorned with a diadem, indicating that it is a portrait of a Hellenistic ruler. Another very similar head has been published from Larissa-on-the-Orontes (Seyrig, *Syria* 42 (1965) 28–9 and pl. iv): it is inscribed in dedication to Artemis, and is also diademed. Seyrig dated it as not prior to the 2nd century BCE. Another parallel from Cyrene, not quite so close, has been published by S. Stucchi (*Cirene, 1957–1966* (Tripoli 1967) 121–7; figs. 97, 100, 102, 114, 116), who identifies the subject as Ptolemy III Euergetes. (246–221 BCE). (Cf. now *Antike Kunst*, 18(1975) (i), 17ff.: F. Jucker, “Zum Bildnis Ptolemaios’ III Euergetes I”, especially pl. 4, 4 (Cyrene). This identification is at least in harmony with the diadem worn by two closer parallels. If the identification of the Beth Shean head with Ptolemy III is accepted, this should be of material assistance to a solution of the complicated question of the date of Scythopolis’ foundation as a Hellenistic city.



A. The theatre — General interior view.



B. The lower cavea with late podium at its foot.

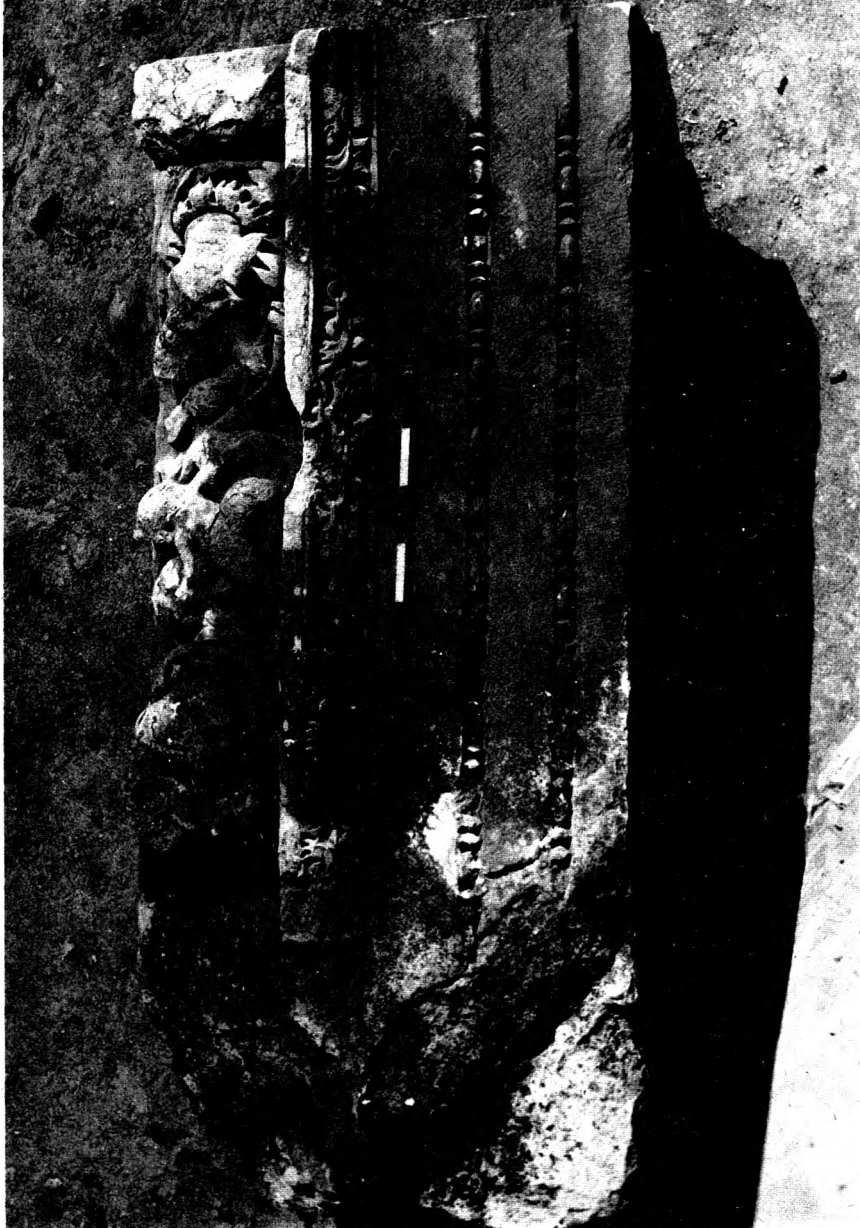


C. The balteus.

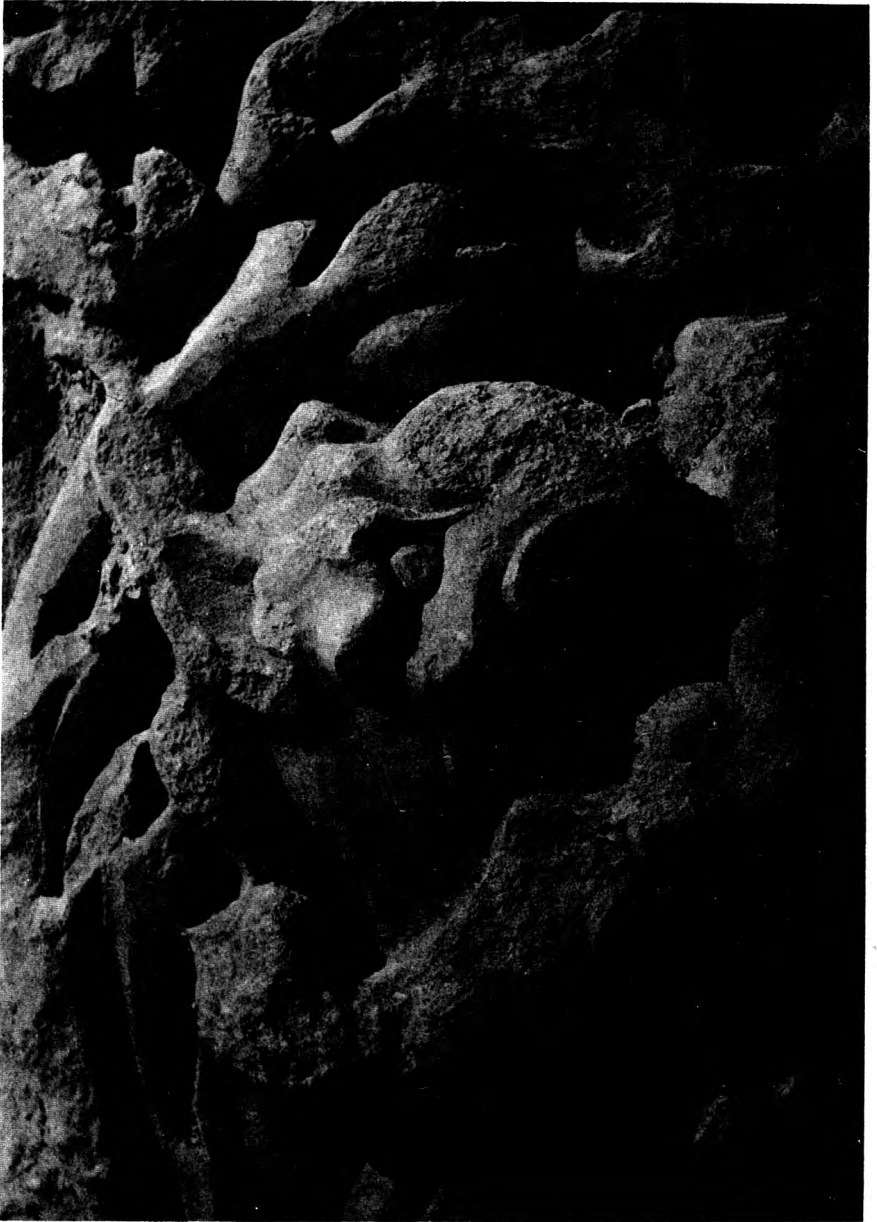


D. Fragment of the architecture and frieze of the





E. Architecture and frieze of the above (D).



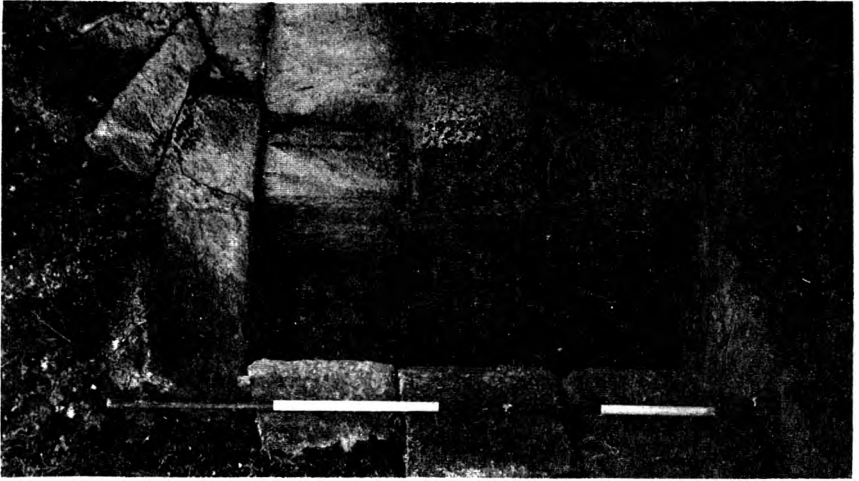
F. As E — close-up.



G. The outer peripheral wall.



H. One of the vomitoria.



I. One of the tholoi — interior.



J. The external podium (between  $\eta$  and  $\zeta$ ).



K. Head of statue found in the western basilica (λ).