

When a theatre *is* a theatre: the Late Antonine/Severan *grande teatro romano* at Gortyn

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GILBERTO MONTALI, *IL TEATRO ROMANO DI GORTINA* (Bottega d'Erasmus, Padua 2006). Pp. 311, figs. 197, pls. 27 (in text), 11 drawings inside back cover. ISBN 88-6125-016-5. EUR. 200.

In *JRA* 20 (2007), F. Yegül entitled his review of O. Bingöl's book "When a *theatron* is not a theater",¹ concluding by the third paragraph (578) that "small theater" should perhaps be preferred to "*theatron*". The problem is even greater for Gortyn whose five theatres have been conflated and misidentified for centuries, but G. Montali's work has lain the confusion to rest. The book is a detailed elaboration of the author's preliminary results as presented in 2000 at a congress on Roman and Early Byzantine Crete.² The city plan reproduced here (fig. 1) shows:

(1) Montali's *teatro romano*, which on A. Di Vita's earlier plans for the Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene is appropriately named the *grande teatro romano*; it lies southeast of the stadium and north of the circus;

(2) a Greek theatre (*teatro dell'acropoli*) on the approach to the acropolis (upper left quadrant) that shows extensive Roman repairs and elaborations;

(3) a much smaller theatre off to the side of the Roman forum, next to the Temple to Pythian Apollo (centre of the plan) and hence called *teatro del Pythion*, even though it is oriented neither with that temple nor with the Roman forum;³

(4) the *Odeion of 'Trajan'* (to the right of the acropolis theatre) in the Greek agora, home to the famous law code transferred from the Temple to Pythian Apollo during the reign of Trajan, which hence bears his name even though it was built no later than the reign of Claudius.⁴

(5) The amphitheatre at Ayia Deka on the E edge of Gortyn should be mentioned here since material from the *grande teatro romano* was sometimes erroneously assigned to it.

From 1998 to 2000, Montali, architect for the Italian school at Athens, studied and drew the structure, while M. Rossi undertook stratigraphical sondages. Primary among the objectives was to determine the structure's design and function and to resolve which early travellers' reports described this structure as opposed to one of the others listed above. As recently as 1911, E. Stephani produced a sketch of this structure as an amphitheatre, although A. Maiuri expressed reservations.⁵ Recently I speculated that the structure was perhaps a double-theatre with back-to-back stages.⁶

The first chapter ("Storia degli studi e delle ricerche"; 27-73) opens with descriptions of the theatre by travelers (largely botanists and physicians to the Venetian court). Buondelmonti was convinced that Gortyn was the site of Minos' palace, and what he described in his *Descrizione Insulae Candiae* (1415) as the entrance to the Labyrinth is plausibly the surviving entry to this theatre;⁷ the *grande teatro romano*, however, does not appear in either of his drawings,

1 F. Yegül, "When a *theatron* is not a theatre: 'a place for viewing' in Magnesia on the Meander," *JRA* 20 (2007) 578-82, a review of O. Bingöl, *Theatron. Magnesia on the Meander* (2005).

2 G. Montali, "Il grande teatro romano di Gortina," in A. M. Livadiotti e I. Simiakaki (edd.), *Creta romana e protobizantina: atti del congresso int.* (Padova 2004) 709-24.

3 It has been under excavation since 2002 by J. Bonetto and F. Ghedini of the Università degli Studi di Padova. A report was circulated privately in 2004 and notices appear in the *Atti di archeologica* of the Scuola in *ASAtene* 80 (2002) 885-98 and 81 (2003 [2005]) 885-912; reports for 2004 and 2005 are available on their web-site: www.lettere.unipd.it/discant.

4 Ongoing investigations should provide evidence for phases of construction and repair. A foundation date as early as Augustus is not impossible.

5 By E. Stefani in A. Maiuri, "Ricerche intorno all'anfiteatro di Gortina nell' isola di Creta," *Ausonia* 6 (1911) 7-26; the relevant passage is quoted by Montali on 47-48.

6 G. W. M. Harrison, *The Romans and Crete* (Amsterdam 1994) 127-29; dismissed (rightly) by Montali on 54.

7 The palace of Minos, for example, must be the Byzantine fortification on top of the acropolis. His *templum superbum* could be the *Megali Porta*, now securely identified as a bath complex (see below).

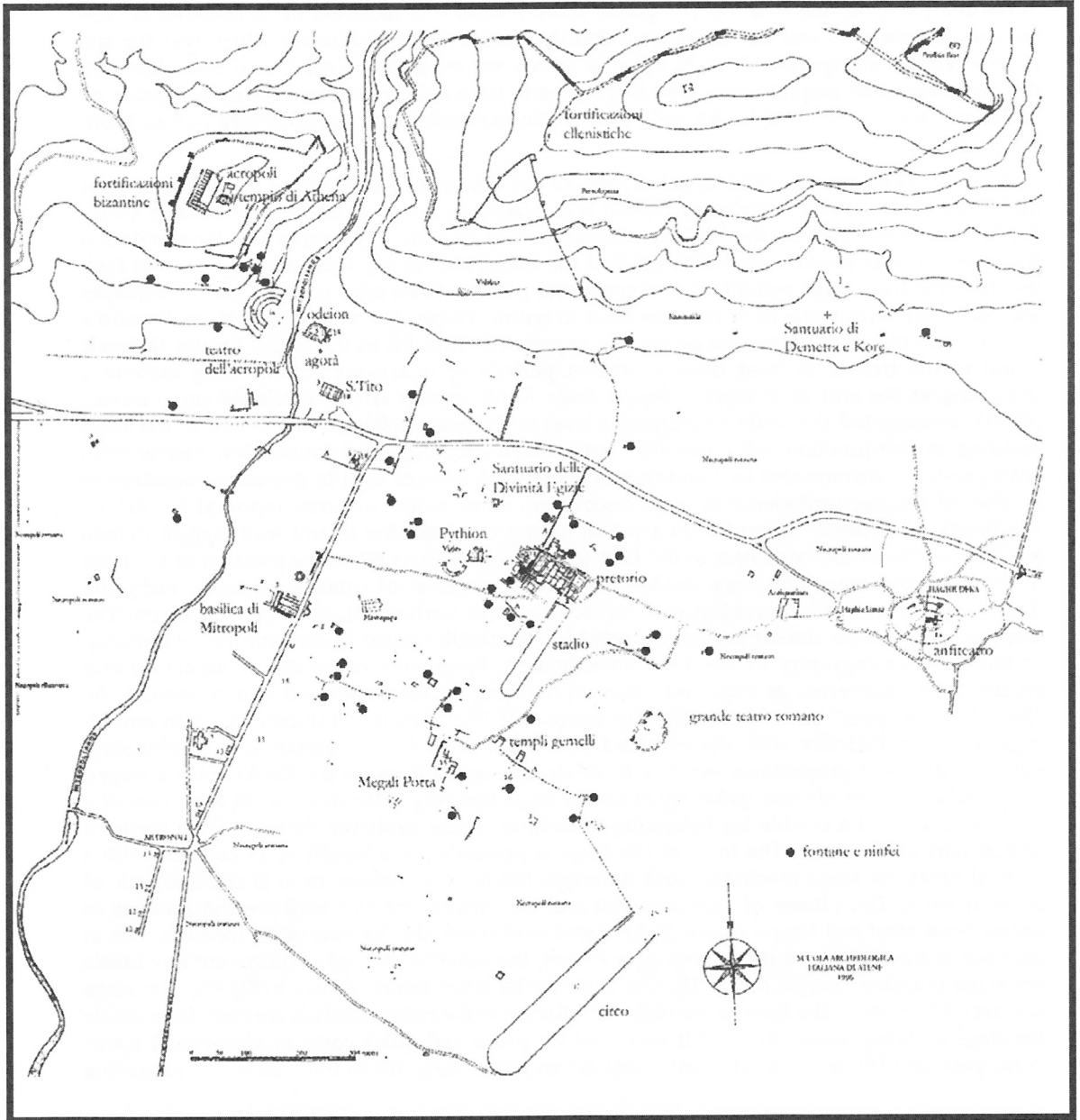


Fig. 1. Plan of Gortyn showing the principal entertainment buildings: 1. Acropolis theatre, at upper left; 2. Severan theatre near the Pythion, close to the Roman forum, at the centre; 3. Roman Odeion in the Greek Agora, to the right of the Acropolis theatre; 4. Amphitheatre, at the centre of the right edge of the plan; 5. Montali's "Grande teatro romano", southeast of the stadium and north of the circus. (From Montali, tav. V on p. 77, reproduced by permission from Aldo Ausilio, Bottega d'Erasmus).

nor is it included in the 1588 description by Barozzi.⁸ The first drawing of the theatre is that of Belli in a letter dated 24 April 1586 to Valerio Barbarano. Another letter to Barbarano which alludes to a larger study on Crete contains drawings of two theatres in Gortyn and 5 more

8 Barozzi incorporated notes of Belon's visit of 1549, which would otherwise be unknown.

throughout the island. Neither theatre in Belli's autograph manuscript⁹ can be this theatre; instead, one is the theatre on the slopes of the acropolis, while the other is that in the vicinity of the Temple to Apollo Pythios. The *grande teatro romano* was recorded by E. Falkener in 1854 but unfortunately he was determined to identify it with the amphitheatre which was the site of an infamous martyrdom. T. A. B. Spratt's *Travels and research in Crete* (1865) also identified this structure as an amphitheatre, and that seems to have influenced the 1911 investigation by A. Maiuri and G. Bendinelli, the only systematic exploration of the structure before Montali's.¹⁰

Pages 55-73 summarize the 5 trenches Montali put down (see plans A2 and A3 at the back for their locations).¹¹ *Saggio Orchestra* (55-60) was placed in the area of the orchestra to verify the floor level revealed by the 1911 trenches as well as its state of preservation. Even within a 3-m trench it was possible to determine that the limestone paving was carefully cut and laid, the different-sized flags being laid in a geometric pattern. Even after centuries of earthquakes and earth movement, the floor remains level to within 10 cm. The area is full of small marble architectural pieces and covered by rubble, apparently from fill in the walls. Of the 18 levels found in the trench, at least three represent periods of quarrying for building materials, beginning at the end of antiquity. *Saggio Scala Nord, versura settentrionale del corpo scenico* (60-61), investigated the stairs to the upper level of the *scaenae frons* at the N end of the stage building at the junction with the side entry. Well-dressed, long foundation blocks with anathyrosis are surmounted by flan bricks, surviving 15 courses high in places. A considerable number of architectural elements were discovered. Some match material reported in 1911 by Bendinelli, particularly a cornice on a plinth jutting out from the lateral wall. *Saggio Pulpito* (61-70) was laid in the *cavea* next to the 1911 trench in order to confirm the position of the front of the stage building. This area yielded the greatest number of catalogued finds, including three marble cornices (one raking, one curved, the third horizontal), all superbly carved. The discovery of cornices similar to ones reported by Bendinelli helped to confirm the relationship of Montali's stratigraphy to the 1911 investigation. Fragments of marble architecture and statues were recovered, as expected, since in his long trench Bendinelli had recovered the "Seated philosopher" on exhibit in the site museum.¹² Two marble plinth cornices with mouldings accord stylistically with the cornice from *Saggio Scala Nord*. Capitals in a similar style but with different proportions verify a three-storey *scaenae frons* on the flanks, plus a larger, more elaborate central door (*porta regia*) on the stage building. Also discovered were part of a loricated statue and a marble leg belonging to another statue, probably deriving from the back central part of the stage. The front of the stage is preserved to a height of 15 courses, with a vertical break for stage machinery and drainage; the brick to mortar ratio is characteristic of Severan work. The phases of abandonment and destruction for this wall are the same as in *Saggio Scala Nord* and *Saggio Esedra II*. This was confirmed also by two other trenches, one at the back of the seating on the East (*Saggio Pilone*), the other in the right equipment bay inside the stage building (*Saggio Esedra II*). The floor in the latter trench showed (72) that the stage was set c.2.5 m above the floor of the orchestra. Access to the niche would have been from inside the stage building, indicating that it was used for props and quick costume changes. A transverse passage (0.89 m wide) allowed direct access to the stage off to the side of the projecting

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- 9 Belli's *Descrizione geografica dell'isola de Candia* does not seem to have had a wide dissemination and even now remains in a private collection. On Belli and the Cretan theatres, see also I. F. Sanders, *Roman Crete* (Warminster 1982).
- 10 Maiuri (supra n.5) and G. Bendinelli, "Frammenti architettonici dell'anfiteatro di Gortyna," *Ausonia* 6 (1911) 27-40.
- 11 Plan A1 gives the location of the two trenches in 1911. Montali's *Saggio Esedra II* is at the front of the stage on a line with, but not tangent to, Maiuri's square at the back of the stage. Maiuri's long trench from the middle front of the stage into the *cavea* is overlapped on one side by *Saggio Orchestra* and *Saggio Pulpito* and on the other side (on the stage) by *Saggio Esedra II*.
- 12 Finds discovered before 2000 were displayed or stored in the Archaeological Museum at Heraklion. Since inauguration of the museum at Gortyn, many items have been transferred, hence Gortyn objects reported as being in Heraklion may no longer be there.

central door. Two Ionic column bases of different dimensions must have belonged to columns flanking the *porta regia* on the upper and lower levels.

Chapter 2 turns to the 'general character and analysis of the structure' (75-101): it considers the *cavea*, main entry, orchestra, stage front, *scaenae frons*, ends of the stage, and interior of the stage building. Roman Gortyn expanded east and south away from the acropolis and the Greek agora, and this theatre is one of many buildings in an area that had not been intensively built up; the positions of fountains (shown as dots on fig. 1) and cemeteries help define the extent of urbanization. The Hippodamian plan of this quadrant of the city thus accounts for the theatre's orientation and reveals that not just the theatre but many structures hereabouts were part of a comprehensive phase of planning and construction.

What mainly emerges is a type of theatre familiar from many other examples in the East. Twenty-three sections of seats rest on 24 buttresses, with a colonnaded ambulatory at the top at the back. The buttresses are built of field stones, some quite large, set in cement. At least one entrance remains (fig. 42 on p. 91), wide enough for only one person to pass through at a time. The degree of rise of the internal ramp and gradient in the *cavea* indicate three levels with two *diazomata*. Different quality and colours of stones were used in different parts of the structure. Within the orchestra, white marble was laid close to the stage, other coloured stones elsewhere. At least part of the front of the stage had alabaster revetment. Steps made it possible to move between stage and orchestra, although there is nothing to suggest that the chorus could have entered or exited from the seats. The four exedrae (ready-rooms for props and costume changes) inside the stage building are of interest because the two interior ones communicated with the stage at an angle on the flanks of the *porta regia*, while the two outer ones did not, allowing for characters to appear or disappear rather than make a formal entrance or exit.¹³

Chapter 3, "La struttura muraria e le tecniche costruttive" (103-16), considers construction technique to determine whether the theatre shows signs of later repairs and elaborations. If there was only one period of construction, were different parts of the structure built as semi-independent components? Montali's task was greatly facilitated by conversations with N. Masturzo and C. Tarditi about their on-going work on Gortyn's *Terme della Megali Porta* and *Templi Gemelli*¹⁴ and with M. Livadiotti and G. Rocco, who were completing studies of walls in the city.¹⁵ Similarities of technique and materials in these buildings as well as in one important phase of the Praetorium all suggest a date in the late 2nd c. A.D. Indeed, similar features appear throughout Asia Minor at this time. Montali presents tables of the matrix of brick and mortar for his theatre (105) compared with phases of the Praetorium (107); a second table (109) compares these ratios to the odeion, amphitheatre, Severan repairs to the theatre on the acropolis, *Terme della Megali Porta*, and *Teatro del Python*. Bricks from several of these structures even share marks from brick moulds. As to the *grande teatro romano* (115-16), similarity of clamping and similarity in details of the carving of cornices, bases, and capitals in different parts of the *scaenae frons* and in the ambulacrum point strongly to one phase of construction.

The Catalogue (117-204) is divided into marble architectural decoration, sculpture, and reliefs. Fifty-seven items are illustrated and discussed, almost all conforming to Late Antonine-Severan taste as seen at other imperial sites and executed in Proconnesian, Parian and Thasian

13 Transverse portals would facilitate the movement of non-speaking extras, by definition not important enough to warrant formal entrance/exit, or characters who, for reasons of staging, should not come in or leave by the normal doors or wings (e.g., ghosts).

14 N. Masturzo and C. Tarditi, "Monumenti pubblici di Creta romana: le terme della Megali Porta e i templi gemelli," *ASAtene* 82-83 (1994-95) 225-328.

15 M. Livadiotti, "Criteri di datazione delle murature di età romana a Gortina: confronti con altre aree di Creta," in *Creta romana e protobizantina* (supra n.2) 739-49, and G. Rocco, "Per un approccio sistematico alle tecniche costruttive in *opus testaceum* a Gortina," in A. Di Vita (ed.), *Gortina* V.1 (Padova 2000) 171-86.

marble.¹⁶ Worthy of mention are the simple 4-petal rosettes alternating with palmettes in the middle of the abacus, in preference to the more elaborate carving of capitals elsewhere in the Greek East. The centres of *sima lacunars* are decorated with dolphin, feline emerging from flower, Medusa head, ram's head, eagle with snake, and hawks flanking plant, while the curved cornice at the side of the *porta regia* has anthemia or occasionally a bucrania in the lacunar. Multiple marks on one cornice (cat. no. 27, pl. XV) cannot be mason's marks and so probably indicate positioning.

The longest discussion (174-80) is reserved for an over-lifesize seated male discovered in 1911 and a head which may belong. E. Portale had already identified the body as a post-humous figure of Antoninus Pius.¹⁷ Montali concentrates on the source of the blue-green veined marble and the possible connection of the statue to an Aphrodisian school. Other pieces are less intact and less intriguing, with the exception (187) of a hand holding a 'pyxis' which looks more like a dice cup. Two other pieces attract interest: one is an altar (188-91), found against the front of the stage and possibly from the orchestra, which in that case would follow Greek rather than Roman dramatic practice; on the front it shows a lyre scroll carved in shallow relief, before which is a floral swag with a pendant cluster of grapes and a striding *putto* at the left front corner; the other (194-97) is a relief to Nemesis, now in the British Museum (cat. no. 794) and attributed to "the amphitheatre" in the description by A. H. Smith (1892); the top is missing but what remains is about 30 cm high. A female figure in 'Lysippan' pose stands atop a nude supine male child; on one side of the female is a snake, on the other a frontal griffon. Montali makes a convincing argument that the relief probably belonged to this theatre, not to the amphitheatre on the E edge of the Roman city.

Analyses of bases, capitals, and cornices are reserved for chapt. 5 (205-36). The bases are dispensed with in a single page (206). More attention is given to the capitals fashioned in the Asiatic Corinthian style. Montali (208) looks to the Trajanic capital at Labranda for the source of inspiration for the Severan type. This would accord with Severan political propaganda that the régime was modeled on Trajan's. The best comparanda for the capitals (210-14) come from Perge and from Caesarea and Beth Shean at the E end of the Mediterranean, less so from Cos, Tarsus, and Gabala. Cornices find their best comparanda at Sagalassos, Ephesus, Aspendos, Aphrodisias, Hierapolis and Perge, confirming the general picture that the Crete of this period was looking towards S Turkey more than anywhere else. Perhaps the most significant feature of the cornices of the *grande teatro romano* is the degree of splay of the shell away from the egg, much wider than in earlier periods and even than in other structures at Gortyn. The conclusion Montali draws from the architectural fragments is that the whole theatre belongs to one period and to a single unified design. There is little to be added about the hypothetical reconstruction in chapt. 6 (237-89). Montali's investigations have shown the theatre to have had a double diazoma, with colonnaded portico at the back at the top. The capacity is estimated at 5500-6200.

We can confine the rest of our remarks to the conclusion (291-302). Simplifying somewhat, we can say that the Roman governmental centre, the Praetorium, formed nearly a square, which could then be multiplied into a chequerboard for the new Roman city. Three squares down from the Praetorium lies the *Terme della Megali Porta*; between those two is the stadium of the gymnasium, associated with the Praetorium. Three squares over and one down is the *grande teatro romano*, centered with the long side of the running track. In the square in front as one moves towards the Praetorium there may well have been a portico. The layout thus seems to indicate that construction in this sector was not haphazard. Montali points to an earthquake in the middle of the 2nd c. A.D. (*Inscr. Creticae* IV 333) as the proximate cause of extensive reconstruction that allowed for a comprehensive plan for a governmental and entertainment

16 Montali's "forse," "probabilmente," and "presumibilmente" must be more than caution since P. Pensabene, the marble expert at Gortyn, is widely respected; cf. P. Pensabene and L. Lazzarini, "Marmi, pietre colorate e maestranze a Creta in età imperiale" in *Creta romana* (supra n.2) 763-79, in which the torso of this statue is discussed and a late Antonine/early Severan date is assigned.

17 E. C. Portale in A. Di Vita (ed.), *Gortina* III (Padova 1998) 277-512 with pls. 36-73.

district. He sees the theatre as defining the E edge of the city at that time, with easy access given to it by a system of streets. The theatre accords well with Vitruvian principles, while its decorative details find parallels in the Greek East rather than in the West. It projects stolidity and unity, not individuality or *avant garde* elements — the civic virtues of the Severan age. The broken front and alternation of curved and straight space is typical of the period in public structures of all kinds. Like other official buildings of the age, the theatre boasted niches, which Montali thinks were reserved for statues of the imperial family, such as Antoninus Pius. Since Gortyn already possessed other quite serviceable theatres, Montali takes the *grande teatro romano* to be a piece of conspicuous display, a visual symbol of the success of Romanisation.

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