

## THE RELIEF DECORATIONS OF THE ANCIENT ROMAN THEATER: THE CASE OF SABRATHA

MARÍA ISABEL RODRÍGUEZ LÓPEZ

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

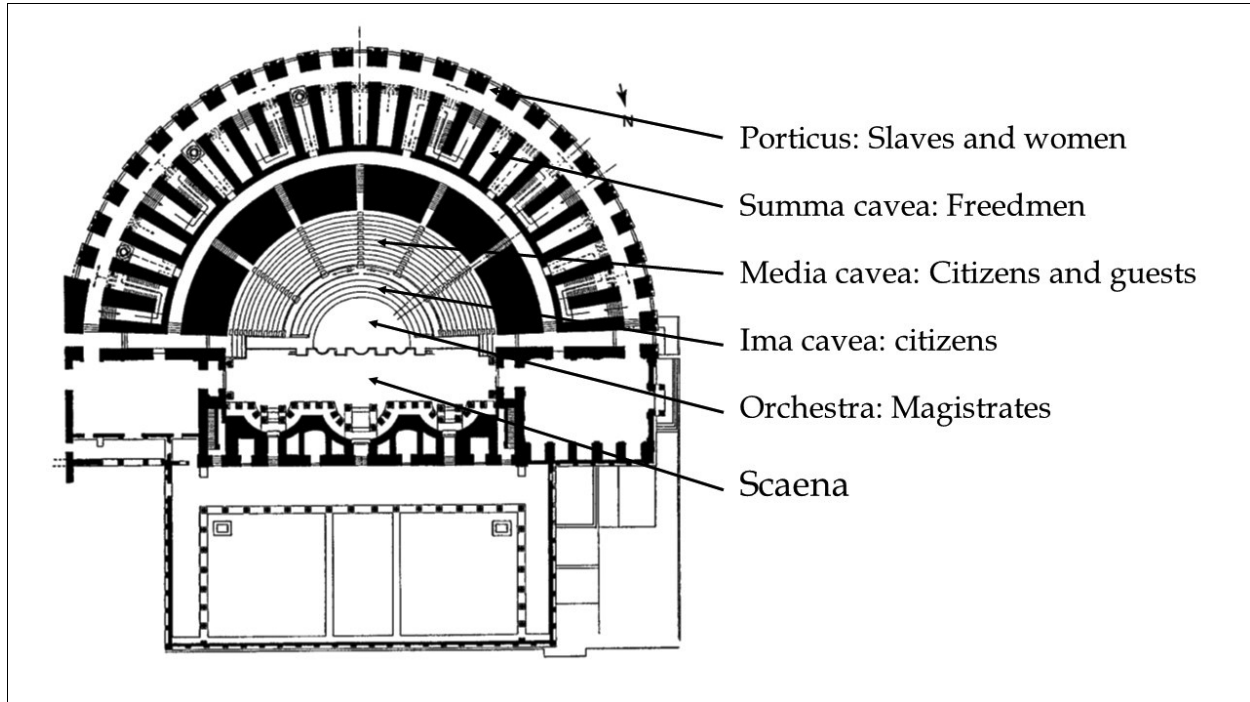
**LUDISCAENICI AND THE ROMAN SOCIETY.** To Romans, the word *theatrum* designated the building for celebration of the *ludi scaenici*, which were theatrical representations included in public games performed in honor of gods. Their religious underlining always remained present to some extent, and precisely this intimate relationship with the traditional Roman cults and pagan religion prompted the early Fathers of the Christian Church to condemn the spectators of theatrical and circus performances.<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo and Tertullian both refer to the Greek origins of theatrical games, establishing an opposition between the virile Roman nature and the Greek effeminacy. Augustine's rejection of the moral and political nature of the theater plays, expressed in his *De Civitate Dei*, was more a reference to ritual theatrical games than to tragedies and comedies.<sup>2</sup> In chapter X of Tertullian's *De spectaculis*, he defined theater as "theatrum propie sacrarium Veneris est" (the theater that is characteristic of Venus sanctuaries).<sup>3</sup>

The *ludi scaenici* were one of the best expressions of the Roman society, culture, and their collective sentiment. We would call them today "shows for masses". They usually presented political opinions, and played an essential role in the dynastic propaganda and imperial worship, especially from the first century AD onwards. Cicero noted that some *vires* were acclaimed or booed in the theater what in turn influenced his popularity [sources I].

Theater was, therefore, a public space for representation and propaganda; its monumental architecture was used for a variety of purposes, similar to our present multipurpose buildings suitable for assemblies, concerts and various public events, as well as dramatic performances. Due to such character, in the decoration of the areas open to public – particularly in the scenic front – nothing was left to chance concerning the iconographic programs.

The structure of theatrical buildings is well documented: it was a closed space with high semi-circular stands raised on vaults and divided in three sectors (*ima cavea*, *media cavea*, and *summa cavea*), surrounding also semi-circular *orchestra*. Behind the scene stood the elevated scenic front (*frons scaenae*) of imposing architecture, which also served as an acoustic screen and as a place for propagandistic display of statues of gods, rulers and distinguished men. At its back was a portico (*porticus post scaenam*) purposed for the conversation and recreation of the spectators, usually adorned with gardens and statues. Such architectural structure was the result of an evolutionary process that has its origin in Greece. As a consequence of the Romanisation process, the Greek architectural model, in Rome first implemented at Pompey's theater (built in 55 BC), spread without significant variations throughout the territories annexed to the Urbs. Vitruvius in his *De architectura* insisted that the location of a theater must be healthy and its construction solid and adapted the optimal mathematical proportions for hearing [sources II].

Beyond the structural constraints imposed by the architectural parameters, the division of the Roman theater into clearly differentiated sectors reflected the rigid Roman society and the organization of its eche-



1. The organization of social groups in the Sabratha theater.

lons, since the location of the spectators in the *cavea* was regulated by legal provisions, especially the so-called *Lex Iulia Theatralis*, a faithful reflection of the Augustan ideology [sources III].<sup>4</sup>

Hence, magistrates, priests and senators had their places reserved in the *orchestra*, and behind them were the knights (*equites*). The *ima cavea* was section designated for seating of settlers, free citizens and officials; in *media cavea* were seated further settlers and guests (*incolae*); and in the upper terraces (*summa cavea*) were the places for freedmen, passers-by and *pullati* (the humblest social group, not dressed in toga). Lastly, the slaves were in the upper area, which did not have assigned seats. Beside them was a porch reserved for women. The distribution of seats in the Roman theater was a micro cosmos reflecting the social fabric and the hierarchy can be understood as “a city within a city” [fig. 1].<sup>5</sup> The *Lex Iulia Theatralis* also regulated the dress code for each sector which made even more apparent the distinction between the classes: the presiding person of the spectacle wore the *toga picta* (triumphal dress); the magistrates the *toga praetexta*; the senators the simple toga with *latus clavus* (wide stripes), and the *equites* toga with *angusticlavi* (narrow stripes).<sup>6</sup>

**DECORATION OF THEATRICAL BUILDINGS IN ANCIENT ROME.** Given the character of the theatrical building as a place for representation and political propaganda, the images used for its decoration were thoughtfully conceived, with iconographic programs that suited the principle of *decorum* described by Vitruvius. According to him, the represented subjects should be adequate to the space they occupied. Gilles Sauron pointed out that the theater was a privileged place for the expression of ideological programs.<sup>7</sup> This decoration included the conjunction of bulky sculptures, reliefs, paintings, mosaics and *oscilla*, whose subjects were related to the theatrical world, the related gods and the political propaganda. Due to their fragility, wall paintings decorating theaters have been recovered in a very fragmented state, although some buildings allow us to get a modest glimpse of their magnificence and iconographic interplay with sculptures.<sup>8</sup>

The preserved theaters generally include two groups of representations: sculptures in the round that occupied the niches in the *frons scaenae* and the *porticus post scaenam*, and the reliefs that were part of the architectural decoration on the building itself, ornamenting the proscenium (*muris pulpiti*) and other places.



2. Relief of a seated poet (Menander) with masks of New Comedy (1st century BC to early 1st century AD). White marble, probably Italian, 48.5 × 59.5 × 8.5 cm. Princeton University, Art Museum Museum purchase, Caroline G. Mather Fund y1951-1.

The first group usually included representations of dignitaries, sponsors and benefactors wearing toga, associated with dynastic propaganda, portraits of the Imperial family and images of gods. Occasionally, some statues represented Papposileno and other characters of the dramatic fiction. For example, the well-known theater of Emerita Augusta in present-day Mérida in Spain, from the Flavian era included in the *frons scaenae* the effigies of several togate: Augustus, Tiberius and Drusus (first phase) and several *thoracatae* of the divinized emperor, Agrippina Minor, Ceres, Pluto and a Muse (second phase).<sup>9</sup> The second group of representations includes more varied subjects and recurrent themes: theatrical masks, actors, Dionysiac characters (maenads, erotes, satyrs, centaurs), myths (evocation of titles of plays) and others (Victory, Gorgon, the Muses and gods).<sup>10</sup>

The iconographic motif par excellence was the mask, both tragic and comic, evoking the essence of the theatrical representation itself and an iconographic attribute identifying the actor. Masks can be seen everywhere (friezes, entablatures, capitals) in every known Roman theater [fig. 2]. Other scenes were more complex. In the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, for example, is represented his birth and childhood.<sup>11</sup> In other places are shown victories and/or images of gods. Less frequent were scenes of battles and *munera*, as in the Roman theater of Ephesus, decorated during the Trajan era (AD 98-117).<sup>12</sup>

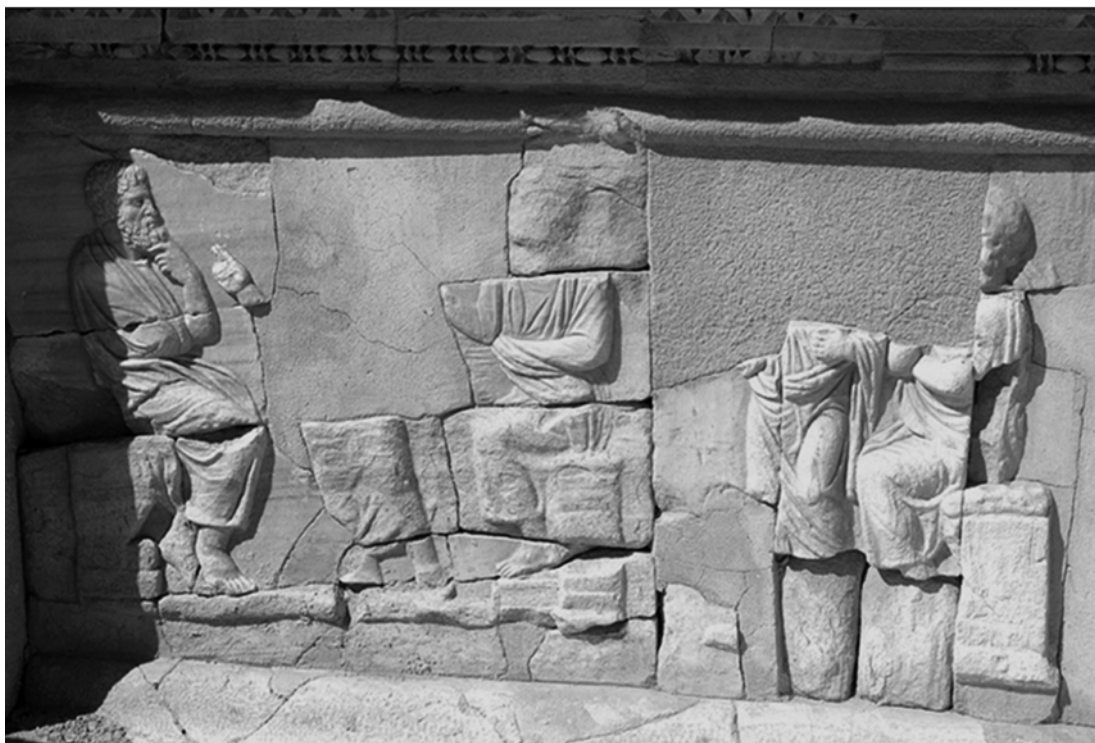


3. The theater at Sabratha (Zawiya District in Libya; constructed in AD 175–200), was started by Emperor Marcus Aurelius, continued by his son Commodus and completed with a lavish proscenium by Emperor Septimius Severus. The theater had 25 entrances and could seat between 5200 and 6450 spectators. The sight was largely reconstructed by Italian archaeologists in the 1930s.

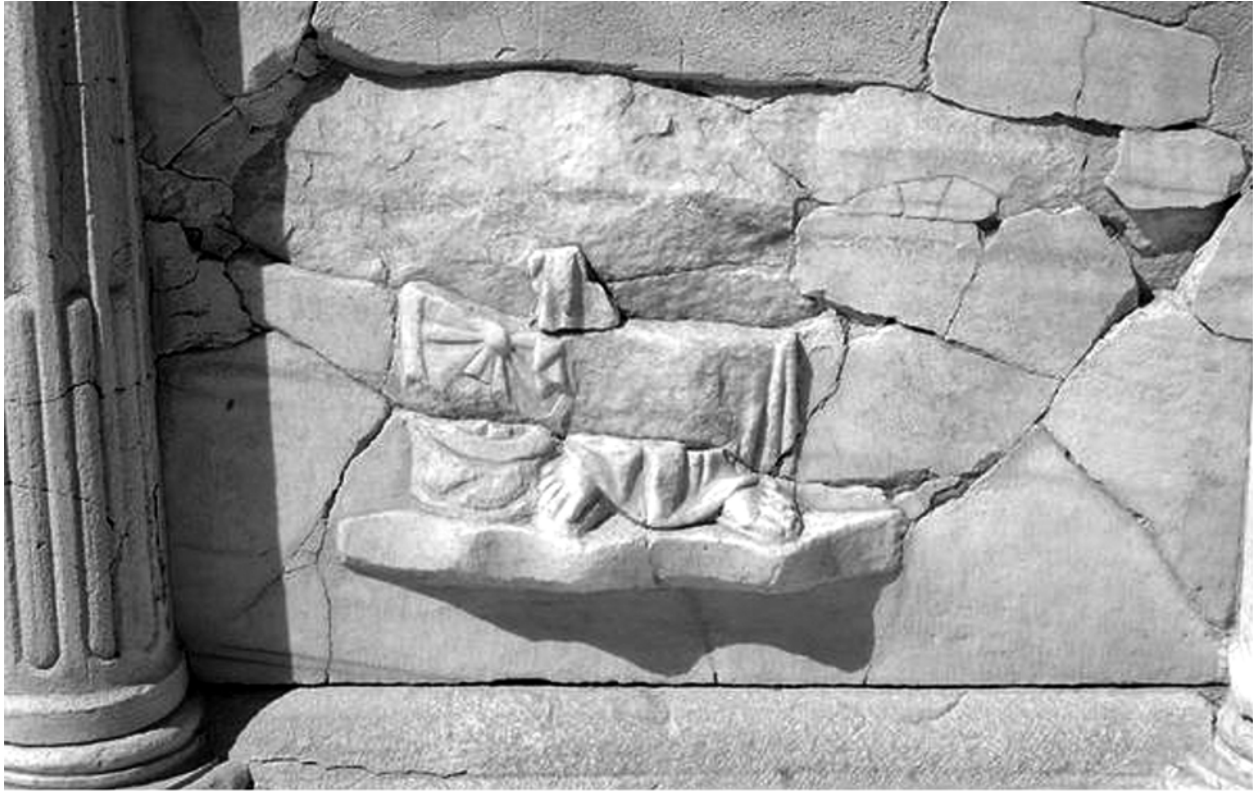
**THE MURUS PULPITI OF THEATER IN SABRATHA.** The theater of Sabratha (now Libya), a small coastal city of the ancient Tripolitania, has a magnificent decoration and imposing stonework built during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (emperor AD 161–180) and completed during Septimius Severus (emperor AD 193–211).<sup>13</sup> The site was excavated in the 1910s and it was subjected to a process of anastylosis that restored its ancient splendour and magnificence [fig. 3].<sup>14</sup> Located in the Regio IV of the city, the theater had the capacity between 5200 and 6450 spectators and it was used until the earthquake of AD 365.<sup>15</sup> The first analysis of this building and its comparison with other African theaters was done by Giacomo Caputo (1901–1992), who published in 1959 a description of the reliefs located in the so-called *pulpitum* (the *murus pulpiti* or *proscenium*, which is the front bridging the gap between the *orchestra* and the stage).<sup>16</sup> The iconographic description proposed here is based, as it could not be otherwise, on the study of Caputo; his work has allowed us to consider some differences regarding his interpretation and led us to suggest a personal iconological analysis and a reflection on the examined icons.

This *pulpitum* constitutes an extraordinary example of its kind, given the wonderful state of conservation of its reliefs and the diversity of the iconography. Built completely out of marble, it rises to a height of 138 cm above the *orchestra* level and it is connected to it on each side by a set of five steps. It consists of seven exedras that alternate rectangular and semi-circular profiles flanked by Ionic columns decorated with reliefs. Two parapets in the shape of large dolphins separate the seats and the stage.

Two reliefs behind the dolphins show maenads facing each other while dancing in pairs. They show a bare breast and the contortion of their bodies rhythmically moves their tunics. The two figures on the left perform a delicate dance step holding their garments by their hands [fig. 4]; the figures on the right dance sounding the *crotala* with their raised hands. Caputo has pointed out that both cases show “il vivo senso dell’azione”.<sup>17</sup> The prototype of these dancers, as it is well known, is of Greek origin, attributed to Callimachus (fifth century BC), which was widely disseminated in antiquity.



Sabratha theater: 4. First exedra showing two figures dancing (section a in the iconographic program outlined in fig. 17). – 5. Three Greek authors (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides?) (section 1).



Sabratha theater: 6. Nemesis, goddess of justice, revenge, balance and fortune (section b). — 7. The Muses Clio, Urania, Euterpe, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Calliope (section 2).



Sabratha theater: 8-9. Lateral walls of the third exedra, stage props or domestic accessories (left, *cista* and *subsellium*; right, *mensa delphica*) (section 3). — 10. Third exedra showing a theatrical scene (section 3). — 11. A scene showing shaking hands of the personifications of Rome and Sabratha surrounded by two sacrificial scenes (section 4).



Sabratha theater: 12–13. Mercury with the infant Bacchus (section e) and Hercules (section f). —  
14. Dialogue of tragic actors: Hercules and Hylas (section 5).





Sabratha theater: 15. The Three Graces and the Judgment of Paris (section 6). – 16. Theatrical scene (section 7).

The first exedra (in rectangular form) presents a scene associated with the world of theater that, in Caputo's opinion, could be a recitation school or an academy of actors.<sup>18</sup> The scene includes several characters, seated and standing: the best-preserved figure is on the left of the composition which evokes the Hellenistic iconography of the intellectual. Barefoot and wrapped in his *himation*, as if he were a thinker, he places

his right hand under the chin, indicating reflection or attention. This is a characteristic gesture of the iconography of writers and philosophers, as it can be seen, for example, in the relief of Anaximander preserved in the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome. The figure in front of him is almost lost; only part of the right hand has been preserved, which seems to present a declamatory gesture. Caputo suggested that the three seated characters could be the great tragic authors: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, what is difficult to prove due to the state of conservation of the relief.<sup>19</sup> In any case, it is more important to understand that this evocation shows three Greek authors, as they are iconographically and symbolically equated with the figure of the creator, who are elevated to the rank of the intellectuals [fig. 5]. On the sides of this exedra are placed objects that can be associated with an academy or school: a solar clock is situated on an Ionic column, several volumes can be seen on a pedestal and one of them is opened for reading, placed on another pedestal.

The first forefront shows Nemesis, a primordial deity, goddess of justice, revenge, balance and fortune; the divinity that punishes the excess and measures the happiness of men, who was adored in amphitheaters.<sup>20</sup> Only the lower parts of her legs have been preserved, covered in a *talaris tunica*, next to a wheel and a rock, according to the most popular iconographic prototypes [fig. 6].

The second exedra (in semi-circular form) offers the representation of the Muses with their corresponding attributes, except for Clio, who does not possess any. According to those symbols, we propose the following identification from left to right: Clio, Urania, Euterpe, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia and Calliope [fig. 7]. The next forefront has not been preserved.

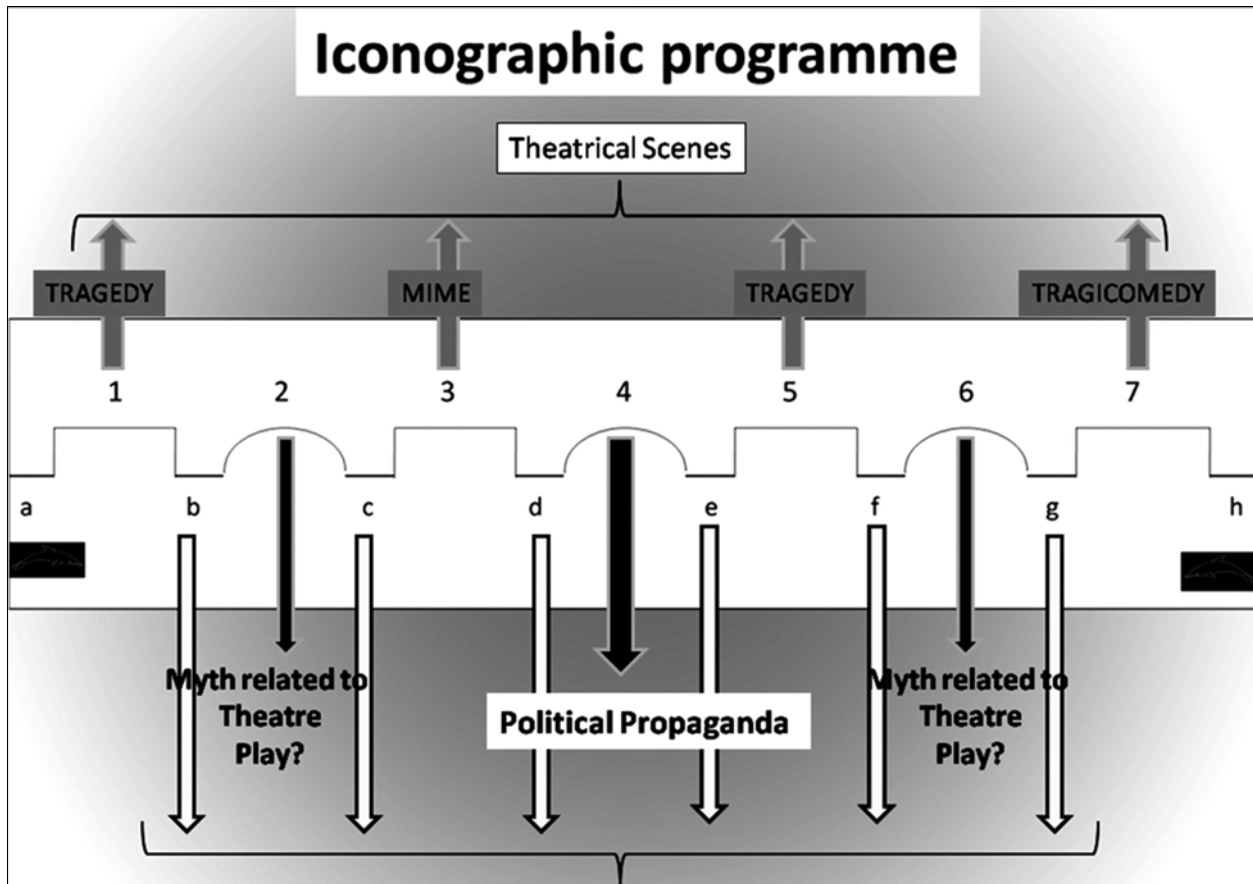
In the lateral walls of the third exedra (in rectangular form) is represented a series of objects: a cist and what Caputo defined as a *subsellium* (bench) on one side, and a tripod and an altar on the opposite side.<sup>21</sup> Caputo's arguments do not necessarily explain the ritualistic nature of these objects or their relation with a particular cult, and we believe that the cist, the leg of a piece of seating or resting furniture, a *mensa delphica* (three-leg table, not a ritual tripod) and other objects impossible to identify might constitute a group of domestic accessories, perhaps part of the stage props, which frame the scene at the background of the exedra [figs. 8 & 9]. A scene of mime has been represented in this exedra, led by three characters, two men and a woman, who express great vivacity and movement in their attitudes. The action unfolds before doors of different sizes, which might evoke the *frons scaenae* of a theater, with their three *valvae* or doors. The woman and man on the side point with their fingers to a person behind them, in a gesture of accusation: it has been suggested that this might represent a scene where husband, wife and lover appear, as Ovid describes in his *Tristia* (II, 497–500):

What if I'd written lewd and obscene mimes,  
that always show the sin of forbidden love,  
in which a smart seducer constantly appears,  
and the skillful wife cons her stupid husband?<sup>22</sup>

The central exedra (in semi-circular form) is the one that corresponds to the *valva regia* (the regal door), and therefore, the most important of the whole theatrical building. Here, two sacrificial scenes frame a subject of political nature. The sacrifice on the left was interpreted as being carried out by Septimius Severus (AD 146–211) as an officiant, assisted by a *camillus* and accompanied by the prefect Plautius and the young Caracalla (AD 188–217).

The central scene has a strong political message. It represents the personification of Rome, wearing military dress,<sup>23</sup> shaking hands with the personification of the city of Sabratha, who wears a high mural crown and holds a cornucopia in her hand. These personifications correspond to a common iconic pattern, as the Sabratha personification is quite similar to Lepits Magna's in the arch of Septimius Severus in that city.<sup>24</sup> The gesture of shaking hands meant concord and loyalty in Rome, as it can be seen in many monetary coinage, accompanied by the legend of *concordia exercitum*; in this case, it alludes to Sabratha's loyalty, submission and respect to Rome. The personifications of the cities are flanked by seven hieratic characters in military uniforms frontally arranged, according to the style normally used in historical bas-reliefs. The exedra is closed on its right side by a bull that is being led to sacrifice [fig. 11].

The fourth forefront shows the figure of Mercury wearing the traveller's chlamys, identified by his great caduceus and winged sandals; the god swiftly carries the infant Bacchus in order to get him away from



17. Iconographic program of the *murus pulpiti* of the theater in Sabratha: a. Two figures dancing; 1. three Greek authors (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides?); b. Nemesis; 2. nine Muses; c. unpreserved; 3. theatrical scene; d. unpreserved; 4. the meeting of Rome and Sabratha; e. Mercury with the infant Bacchus; 5. Hercules and Hylas (theatrical scene?); f. Hercules; 6. the Three Graces and the Judgment of Paris (theatrical scene?); g. unpreserved; 7. theatrical scene; h. dancing maenads.

Juno's jealousy, a well-known episode associated with the birth of the tutelary god of theater [fig. 12]. The sides of the fifth exedra (in rectangular form) show comic and tragic masks, while in the front panel there is a dialogue of tragic actors. Not without reservations, Caputo pointed out that this might be an evocation of the Trachinians of Sophocles, with Hercules and his companion Hylas [fig. 14].<sup>25</sup>

The fifth forefront offers the figure of Hercules identified by the lion skin and the club. His nakedness is highlighting his heroic condition. His right hand is high up and he might have held a golden apple from the Garden of the Hesperides, an allusion to his eleventh labour and probably to a well-known theater play [fig. 13].<sup>26</sup>

The sixth exedra (in semi-circular form) contains several scenes related to the Trojan prince Paris. A rocky grotto, from which he seems to be emerging with great strides (perhaps a shepherd), would have the purpose of placing the scene in the Ida, where Paris lived. Then, the Three Graces are represented, according to the usual iconic patterns, one holding a mirror and the other a bouquet.<sup>27</sup> At the centre of the composition are easily recognized by their attributes and elegance Venus, Minerva and Juno; on the right side are positioned Paris and Mercury. Caputo correctly indicated that this could be an allusion to the famous pantomime of Paris and Mercury, profusely staged until the end of antiquity [fig. 15].<sup>28</sup> This theatrical genre was very popular

and, although forbidden by some emperors, it was widely disseminated until the end of the fifth century AD. In *Metamorphoses* (X, 30–34), Apuleius describes in detail an amazing feast that took place in the Corinthian theater, where a dancing adaptation of the Judgment of Paris was performed with five star actors in the roles of Mercury, Paris, Juno, Minerva, Venus, the Three Graces, the Hours and other deities [sources IV].<sup>29</sup>

In the following forefront, now lost, there was a representation of Victory. Judging by the attires worn by the characters, the last exedra (in rectangular form) contains a scene of tragicomic nature. Bieber identified it as a duel parody, and Caputo as an allusion to Seneca and his duel of Eteocles and Polynices in presence of Jocasta [fig. 16].<sup>30</sup>

**THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OF THE THEATER IN SABRATHA.** The *pulpitum* bas-reliefs in the Sabratha are truly a celebration of theater, its genres, and perhaps its most acclaimed plays, as well as references to some of the gods who were most esteemed by the emperor Septimius Severus during whose reign the theater was completed: the Muses, Dionysus and Hercules. The reliefs decorating the rectangular exedras evoke theatrical scenes from tragedy, mime and tragicomedy, and the figures of Nemesis, Victory, Mercury with the infant Dionysus and Hercules that occupy the forefronts could also be related to popular plays [fig. 17]. Two of the semi-circular lateral exedras show mythological subjects that might have been the plot of famous theatrical representations (Muses, Three Graces and Judgement of Paris), while the central exedra is decorated with a topic of political nature, with an emphasis on the greatness of Rome and the peaceful submission of the peoples included in its empire.

Just like the city *forum*, Roman theaters were places where different social groups would meet and therefore ideal for the dissemination of propaganda. For this reason, their iconographic programs exalted the greatness of Rome above all, as well as the respect presented by all the territories and cities of the Empire. In the example already studied, it is the emperor himself who performs, according to the concept of *pietas*, the necessary sacrifice that “sanctifies” the union and respect among peoples.

The decoration of the *frons scaenae* completes this magnificent group, conforming a unique place where gods and men shared the same scene, both in the sculpted stone and the actual stage. Thus, the adventures of gods become real, in flesh and blood, turned into tragedies, pantomimes or tragicomedies for the solace and education of the audience. And in stone they also reach immortality.

The iconographic motifs used in the decoration of ancient Roman theaters have had a long continuity in Western theaters: tragic and comic masks, Dionysian and musical themes, the Muses, mythological scenes, the evocation of playwrights, their most celebrated works and also symbols of power, among others, embellish, still today, many theaters around the world, decorating their walls, ceilings or curtains.

## NOTES

The photographs by U. Mahler and A. Koch, provided courtesy of the Direktion Landesarchäologie Mainz.

<sup>1</sup> Manuel José Rodríguez Gervais, “Agustín de Hipona contra los espectáculos públicos: ¿Creencia o concurrencia?”, *Arys: Antigüedad, religiones y sociedades* II (1999), 263-273: 267-268.

<sup>2</sup> Agustine of Hippo, *De spectaculis*, X, 5; Rodríguez Gervais, “Agustín de Hipona contra los espectáculos públicos”, 267.

<sup>3</sup> Tertulian, *De spectaculis*, X, 3.

<sup>4</sup> María Dolores Parra Martín, “La Lex Iulia de Theatralis: Organización de la *cavea* en el teatro romano de Cartagena”, *Revista general de Derecho Romano* 15 (2010); Oliva Rodríguez Gutiérrez, “El espacio teatral y su regulación jurídica en época romana: Estructura y legislación”, *Cuadernos de prehistoria y arqueología Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* XXVII (2001), 79-84.

<sup>5</sup> José Luis Jiménez, “Teatro y desarrollo monumental urbano en Hispania”, *Teatros romanos de Hispania. Cuadernos de arquitectura romana* II (1993), 225-238: 237.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edmonson, “Public Spectacles and Roman Social Relations”, *The Colosseum.net*, the resourceful site on the Colosseum <[www.the-colosseum.net/around/Edmonson%20public%20spectacles.htm](http://www.the-colosseum.net/around/Edmonson%20public%20spectacles.htm)>.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Sauron, “Le Forum et le Théâtre: Le decor du culte imperial d’Arles à Merida”, *Culto imperial: Política y poder. Actas del Congreso Internacional Culto Imperial*, ed. by Trinidad Nogales Basarrate and Julián González Fernández (Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2007), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Diana Wood Conroy, “Roman Wall Paintings in the Pafos Theatre”, *Roman Wall Paintings in the Pafos Theatre: Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 2003*, ed. by D.W. Conroy & J. Atkinson (s.l.: s.n., 2004), 275-300: 275.

<sup>9</sup> Trinidad Nogales Basarrate, “Teatro romano de Augusta Emerita: Evolución y programas decorativos”, *Mainake* XXIX (2007), 103-138: 106-115.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Picard, “Motifs dits « décoratifs »: Masques scénici-

ques, oscilla, « olifants », etc., du complexe « temple-théâtre » à Orange-Arausio (Vaucluse)”, *Revue archéologique du Centre de la France* IV/1 (1965), 3-19.

<sup>11</sup> Mary C. Sturgeon, “The Reliefs on the Theater of Dionysos in Athens,” *American Journal of Archaeology* LXXXI/1 (winter 1977), 31-53.

<sup>12</sup> “Ephesus: Photos”, <[www.livius.org/ei-er/ephesus/ephesus\\_photos1.html](http://www.livius.org/ei-er/ephesus/ephesus_photos1.html)>.

<sup>13</sup> Erwin M. Ruprechtsberger, “Sabratha: Eine antike Stadt in Tripolitanien/Sabratha: An Antique City in Tripolitania”, *Antike Welt* XXXII/1 (2001), 35-46.

<sup>14</sup> Theatrum, <[www.theatrum.de/787.html](http://www.theatrum.de/787.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> Antonino di Vita “Sabratha”, *La libia antigua: Ciudades perdidas del Imperio Romano* (Köln: Köneman, 1999), 146-159.

<sup>16</sup> Giacomo Caputo, *Il teatro di Sabratha e l'architettura teatrale africana*. Monografie di archeologia libica 6 (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> For the relationship of Nemesis with spectacles, see, José Beltrán Forte, “Los Devotos de Némesis en el ámbito del anfiteatro hispanorromano”, *Arys: Antigüedad. Religiones y sociedades* IV (2001), 197-210; Michael B. Hornum, *Nemesis: The Roman State and the Games* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Giacomo Caputo, *Il teatro di Sabratha*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ovid, *Tristia*, book 2: “His Plea: The Other Arts”, transl. by A.S. Kline (2003). Poetry in translation, <[www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkTwo.htm#anchor\\_Toc35314590](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidTristiaBkTwo.htm#anchor_Toc35314590)>

<sup>23</sup> The personification of Rome (Dea Roma) was conceived as a young and armed woman, similar in its iconography to Minerva's, although dressed in military attire. It is possible to appreciate her depiction in the mosaic found in vicinity of old Carthage. Cf. second-century AD Roman mosaic, stone and mortar, Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund 05.29, <[www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/17101](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/17101)>.

<sup>24</sup> Image available on line: *Livius.org: Articles on Ancient History* <[www.livius.org/a/libya/lepcis\\_magna/arch\\_severus/arch\\_severus\\_sw\\_frieze\\_b.JPG](http://www.livius.org/a/libya/lepcis_magna/arch_severus/arch_severus_sw_frieze_b.JPG)>.

<sup>25</sup> Giacomo Caputo, *Il teatro di Sabratha*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Francis “The Three Graces: Composition and Meaning in a Roman Context”, *Greece & Rome* XLIX/2 (October 2002), 180-198.

<sup>28</sup> Giacomo Caputo, *Il teatro di Sabratha*, 20-21.

<sup>29</sup> Ismene Richards, *Silent Eloquence: Lucian and Pantomime Dancing* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 40.

<sup>30</sup> M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 129-132. Giacomo Caputo, *Il teatro di Sabratha*, 22.

## SOURCES

### I

M. TULLIUS CICERO, *Orations: Philippics 1–6*, transl. and ed. by D.R. Shackleton Bailey; revised by John T. Ramsey and Gesine Manuwald. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 43-45.

But the Roman people have expressed their sentiments to both of you by many signs, and I am very sorry that these have not had as much effect upon you as they should. What of the shouts of countless voices at the show of gladiators, what of the verses chanted by the people, what of the endless applause for Pompeius' statue and for two tribunes of the plebs who oppose you and your colleague—is not all this enough to signify a truly extraordinary consensus of the entire Roman people? And then there was the applause at the Apollinarian games, or rather the people's testimony and expression of their feelings. Did you find that insufficient? Happy were they who were kept away by force of arms but were present none the less, deep down in the hearts of the Roman people. Or did you think it was Accius who won the applause and the prize sixty years later, and not Brutus? Brutus could not be present at his own games, but at that magnificent spectacle the Roman people paid him in his absence the tribute of their affection, assuaging their longing for their deliverer with sustained clapping and shouting. For my part, I am one who has always scorned such applause when bestowed on demagogues; but when it comes from all ranks, from the highest to the lowest,

from everybody present in fact, and when those who previously made it a habit to follow the popular consensus take to their heels, in that case, I do not regard it as applause but as a verdict. However, if these demonstrations, which are highly impressive, seem rather trivial in your eyes, surely you cannot dismiss, can you, your perception of the deep concern felt by the Roman people for Aulus Hirtius' life? It was enough to be well thought of by the Roman people, as he is, a delight to his friends—no man is more so—loved by his family, who love him very dearly, but the anxiety expressed by decent folk, the alarm—do we remember the like of it in any other such case? Assuredly not.

### II

VITRUVIUS, *On Architecture*, transl. by Richard Schofield; with an intro by Robert Tavernor. Penguin classics (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2009), s.p.

5.III.1. Once the forum has been laid out, one must then select the healthiest possible site for the theatre for the spectacles of the games on the festival days of the immortal gods, following what I have written on healthiness in connection with the sitting of walled cities in Book I. This is because people sitting with pleasure, and their bodies, remaining immobile with enjoyment, present open pores into which wafts of air penetrate, which

would infuse their bodies with noxious vapours if they come from marshy or other unhealthy areas. And so if the site of the theatre is chosen very carefully, problems like this will be avoided.

5.III.2. We must also be careful that it is not exposed to the south, for when the sun fills the curvature of the theatre, the air, enclosed in the auditorium without the possibility of circulating, heats up and glows, then burns, dries out and exhausts the fluids in the spectators' bodies. This is why one must at all costs avoid areas which have disadvantages like this, and select healthy ones.

5.III.3. The procedure for building the foundations will be easier if they are in hilly areas; but if practical necessity requires that they should be built on a plain or a marshy site, reinforcements and substructures must be built in accordance with what was written on the foundations of sacred temples in Book III, above the foundation walls, tiers or seats [*gradationes*] should be built up from the substructure with materials of stone and marble.

5.III.4. The transverse aisles [*praecinctiones*] should evidently be constructed according to a predetermined unit derived from the heights of theatres, and they should not be higher than the width of their own passageways. For if they are higher [at the back], they will throw the voice back and drive it away from the upper section, preventing the word-endings from arriving in intelligible form at the ears of those sitting in their seats above the transverse aisles. All told, the theatre must be organized so that when a piece of string is extended from the lowest to the highest step, it would touch all their top edges and angles; in this way the voice would not be obstructed.

5.III.5. It is appropriate to arrange a large number of wide entrances: the upper ones should be made discontinuous in relation to the lower ones, and should be built straight and without curves from all sectors so that when crowds leave the shows they would not be hemmed in but would have separate and unobstructed exits from all parts of the theatre.

Again, one must take great care that the site is not 'deaf', but that the voice can resonate in it with great clarity: this can be achieved if the site is chosen in an area where the voice is not impeded by reverberation.

5.III.6. For the voice is like a flowing breath of air and is detected on contact by our sense of hearing. It moves itself in an infinity of concentric circles, just as when a stone is dropped in standing water, innumerable expanding circles of ripples develop and spread out from the centre as widely as they can, unless interrupted by the narrowness of the pond or some other obstacle which prevents the patterns of ripples from reaching the end of their course. And so when they are interrupted by obstacles, the first ripples turn back and disturb the pattern of those that follow them.

### III

SUETONIUS, *Life of Augustus/Vita divi Augusti*, transl. with intro. by D. Wardle. Clarendon ancient history series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

44. (1) He reformed and organized the highly confused and disorganized manner of watching the games, because he had been upset by the insult to a senator to whom no one had given a seat in a full house during very well-attended games in Puteoli. So the senate decreed that, whenever any public entertainment was put

on anywhere, the first row of benches should be reserved for senators. At Rome he forbade envoys from free or allied peoples from sitting in the orchestra after he had discovered that sometimes envoys even of freedmen status were being sent. (2) He separated soldiers from the people. He assigned rows of their own to married men from the ordinary people, a section of their own to boys who still wore the bordered toga and one next to it for their tutors, and enacted that no one wearing a dark cloak should sit in the middle tiers. He would not allow women to watch even gladiators except from high up, although it had been the custom for them to watch while sitting among the men. (3) He assigned solely to the Vestal Virgins a separate position in the theatre opposite the praetors' platform. From athletics shows he barred the whole female sex so rigorously that at games given by the pontiffs he postponed a scheduled contest of two boxers until the following day and issued an edict that women were not permitted to come to the theatre before the fifth hour.

### IV

LUCIUS APULEIUS, *The Golden Ass or Metamorphoses*, book X, transl. and intro. by E.J. Kenney. Penguin Classics (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 165-167.

29. This then was the woman with whom I was to be publicly joined in holy matrimony. It was with feelings of deep distress and painful anticipation that I looked forward to the day of the games. More than once I was minded to do away with myself rather than be defiled by contact with this wicked woman and be put to shame and disgraced by being made a public spectacle. However, lacking as I did hands and fingers, I could find no way with my stubby rounded hooves of drawing a sword. My one consolation and ray of hope – slender enough – in my desperate plight was that spring had come once more. Everywhere there was colour: flowers were in bud, the meadows were putting on their bright summer garments, and roses were just beginning to break out of their thorny coverings and diffuse their fragrant scent – the roses which could make me once again the Lucius I had been. Now the day of the games had arrived, and I was led to the theatre in ceremonial procession, escorted by crowds of people. While the show was being formally inaugurated by a troupe of professional dancers, I was left for a while outside the gate, where I had the pleasure of cropping the lush grass which was growing in the entrance. At the same time, as the gates were left open, I was able to feast my eyes on the very pretty sight inside. First I saw boys and girls in the very flower of their youth, handsome and beautifully dressed, expressive in their movements, who were grouping themselves to perform a pyrrhic dance in Greek style. In the graceful mazes of their ballet they now danced in a circle, now joined hands in a straight line, now formed a hollow square, now divided into semi-choruses. Then a trumpet-call signalled an end to their complicated manoeuvres and symmetrical interweavings, the curtain was raised and the screens folded back to reveal the stage.

30. There was a hill of wood in the shape of that famous mount Ida sung by the poet Homer. It was a lofty structure, planted with shrubs and living trees, and on its summit the architect had contrived a spring from which a stream flowed down. Some goats were browsing on the grass; and a young man got up as the Phrygian shepherd Paris in a handsome tunic, draped in a mantle of

oriental style, with a golden tiara on his head, was playing herdsman. To him there entered an extremely pretty boy, naked except for a cloak such as teenage boys wear over his left shoulder. From his blond hair, a striking sight, there projected a matching pair of little golden wings; the wand he carried identified him as Mercury. He danced forward and extended to the actor who represented Paris an apple plated with gold which he was carrying in his right hand, while with a nod he conveyed Jupiter's orders; then he gracefully retired and left the stage. Next there appeared a handsome girl representing Juno, with a shining diadem on her head and carrying a scepter. She was followed by another girl, who could only be Minerva; she wore on her head a gleaming helmet with a wreath of olive round it and held aloft a shield and brandished a spear, just as she appears in battle.

31. After them there entered a third girl, the loveliest of the three, proclaimed as Venus by her ravishing ambrosial complexion, Venus as she was when still a virgin. She was completely naked, showing off her beauty in all its perfection, except for a wisp of thin silk that covered her pretty secrets. This little bit of material, however, the prurient wind in its amorous play now wafted aside to reveal the blossom of her youth and now skittishly flattened against her to cling closely and outline every detail of her voluptuous figure. The white colour of the goddess's skin, symbolizing her descent from heaven, contrasted with the blue of her dress, recalling her connection with the sea. Each of the girls enacting the goddesses had a supporting escort. Juno was attended by actors impersonating Castor and Pollux, wearing egg-shaped helmets with a star for crest. This actress with restrained and natural gestures performed a dignified piece of miming, moving to an accompaniment of airs on the Ionian pipe, in which she promised to confer on the shepherd, if he adjudged the prize of beauty to her, dominion over Asia. The girl whose warlike get-up had made a Minerva of her was flanked by two boys, the armed attendants of the goddess of battles, Terror and

Fear, leaping about with naked swords. Behind them a Dorian piper sounded a martial strain, alternating bass notes with strident trumpet-like tones to stimulate their brisk and vigorous dancing. This goddess, tossing her head and glaring threateningly, with rapid and complicated gestures indicated vividly to Paris that if he awarded her the victory in the beauty contest, he would with her aid be a great warrior with a glorious roll of battle-honours.

32. But now Venus, to immense applause from the audience, took centre stage. Surrounded by a throng of happy little boys, she stood sweetly smiling, an enchanting sight. These chubby children with their milk-white skin were for all the world like real Cupids just flown in from the sky or the ocean. Their little wings and their little bows and arrows and the rest of their costume made the resemblance perfect; and as if their mistress was on her way to a wedding breakfast they lighted her footsteps with flaming torches. Next there entered a crowd of pretty unmarried girls, on this side the gracefulest of Graces, on that the loveliest of Hours, strewing garlands and flowers in honour of their goddess and in the intricacies of their artful dance essaying to delight the queen of heaven with all the rich bounty of the spring. Now the pipes breathed sweet Lydian harmonies; and while these were seducing the hearts of the spectators, Venus, even more seductive, began to dance. Advancing with slow and deliberate steps, her supple figure gently swaying and her head moving slightly in time to the music, she responded to the languishing melody of the pipes with elegant gestures. Now her eyes fluttered provocatively, now they flashed sharp menaces, and at times she danced only with them. As soon as she appeared before the judge it was plain from the movement of her hands that she was promising that, if she were preferred to the other goddesses, she would give Paris a wife of pre-eminent loveliness matching her own. At this the Phrygian youth readily handed the girl the golden apple he was holding as the token of her victory.

