

# NEAR EASTERN THEATRES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE THEATRES AT Bostra, Caesarea, Neapolis (Nablus), and Petra in their final centuries of use, considering in particular their architectural form, their function, and the circumstances of their eventual abandonment. The analysis ties into two lines of investigation into the nature of public spectacles in late antiquity. On the one hand, architectural evidence has suggested to several scholars that theatres were adapted in late antiquity for the production of a wide array of spectacles, including gladiatorial combat, *venationes*, and aquatic shows.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the importance of theatrical entertainment in late antique Rome is confirmed by the codex-calendar of A.D. 354, in which 177 days are associated with *ludi scaenici* and *circenses*.<sup>2</sup> Various literary sources indicate the persistent popularity of festivals and theatrical entertainment in the Near East as well.<sup>3</sup> This study offers a re-interpretation of the later form of theatres in the Near East in light of the regional architectural tradition and the strength of the literary testimony.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest known theatres in the Near East were constructed at the end of the first century B.C. and beginning of the first century A.D., during programs undertaken in Judaea and Nabataea by local kings under the influence of Rome, and in Syria by Julius Caesar and Augustus.<sup>5</sup> The number of imperial dedications

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<sup>1</sup> de Bernardi Ferrero 1974: 4.148–149; Dyggve 1958: 138; Segal 1995: 13; Traversari 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Salzman 1990: 119–120.

<sup>3</sup> Barnes 1996; Csapo and Slater 1995: 319–320; Lim 1997; Litsas 1981. See, for example, Choricus of Gaza, *Apologia mimorum* (Gaza, sixth century); Dio Chrys. *Hom. 7 in Mt., Contra ludos et theatra*, and several other homilies (Antioch and Constantinople, fourth century); *Lib. Or.* 64 (Antioch, fourth century); *Lucian Salt.* (Antioch, second century).

<sup>4</sup> The Near East is defined in this study as the provinces of Arabia, Judaea (renamed Syria Palaestina after the Bar Kochba war of 132–135), and Syria. In the later empire the area was redefined as Arabia, Phoenice, Augusta Libanensis, and Palaestina (divided in the late fourth century into Prima, Secunda, and Tertia) and Syria Coele. These Roman provinces comprise modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, Syria, and Turkish Hatay.

<sup>5</sup> The earliest theatres include Antioch (Malal. 9.5, 217), Caesarea (*BJ* 1.21.8, 415), Damascus and Sidon (*BJ* 1.21.11, 422), Jerusalem (*AJ* 15.8.1, 268), Laodicea (Malal. 19.15, 223), Petra (Negev 1993), and Wadi Sabra (Lindner 1982). Important cities in northern Syria such as Antioch, Apamea, Laodicea, and Seleucia perhaps had stone theatres in the Hellenistic period, but we lack archaeological data to this effect (see Frézouls 1989: 386).

grew steadily through the second century, and began to decline in the middle of the third century. Few theatres were built anywhere in the empire after ca A.D. 300; in the Near East, only the theatre at Antipatris, whose construction is thought to have been initiated by the emperor Julian, seems to date to the fourth century.<sup>6</sup>

Pantomime and mime continued to dominate the stage as the favoured forms of theatrical entertainment in late antiquity, as they had since the second century A.D.<sup>7</sup> According to the mid-fourth-century *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* (32), Tyre and Berytus were especially famed for their mimes, and Caesarea for its pantomimes. The frequency with which the topic of theatre was addressed by the Church Fathers, and the number of laws dealing with audience and actors, suggest the central role that theatre still held in the life of cities in the Christian period.<sup>8</sup>

Festivals, many of which were associated with theatrical entertainment, continued to be produced for the pleasure of the public for several centuries in the Christian period, until the clampdown by the Council of Trullo in Constantinople in 691–692.<sup>9</sup> But several sources suggest that the theatre came under serious threat by the imperial authorities in the sixth century. Joshua the Stylite (46) recorded that in A.D. 501/2, on the occasion of the Maioumas festival, there came an edict from the emperor Anastasius that no dancers (of pantomime) in any city throughout the empire should dance anymore. According to the sixth-century chronicler John Malalas (17.12, 416–417), it was following a riot in Antioch led by the Blues that severe measures were taken by the emperor Justinian: spectacles were prohibited and all dancers throughout the East were banished, except from Alexandria in Egypt. Procopius (*SH* 26.6–8) also associated the end of public spectacles with the reign of Justinian, but he suggested that the underlying cause was financial. Theatres, hippodromes, and amphitheatres, he claimed, were closed when the treasury could no longer afford to support the numerous people employed in the entertainment industries.<sup>10</sup> Whether historically accurate or not, Procopius' statement reflects the decline in municipal resources experienced in many cities during the fourth to sixth centuries.

The lack of municipal resources led to a reduction in the construction of new buildings with public money.<sup>11</sup> In Rome, several laws passed in the 360s stipulated that imperial permission had to be obtained for the construction of new public buildings, and officials were often instructed to use funds to restore existing

<sup>6</sup> Barnes 1996: 166. On the theatre at Antipatris, see Beck and Kochavi 1993.

<sup>7</sup> On mime and pantomime, see Csapo and Slater 1995: 369–389; Barnes 1996: 166–173.

<sup>8</sup> On these mandates, see Chambers 1903: 1.12–17; Coleman-Norton 1966; Vööbus 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Canon 62, Council of Trullo. See Maas 2000: 183.

<sup>10</sup> Procopius conversely claimed in a panegyric that Justinian restored the theatres of Antioch after the Persian sack (*Aed.* 2.10.22).

<sup>11</sup> Bury 1958: 2.351–358; Cameron 1993a: 83.

structures rather than to build new ones.<sup>12</sup> In the Near East the basic arrangement of public space remained much the same until the sixth century, when the old public buildings began to be encroached upon and subdivided, and new types of structure were built.<sup>13</sup> Theatres were among the traditional public buildings that survived in this way in the urban landscape of many cities in late antiquity.

## II. ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

The theatres in the Near East were designed according to the traditional Roman plan, with a semicircular auditorium (*cavea*) set around an orchestra, a stage (*pulpitum*), and a scene building (*scaena*) faced with a colonnaded screen (*scaenae frons*) holding statues of gods, personifications, the imperial family, and patrons.<sup>14</sup> The structure could be entered through vaulted passages in the auditorium (*vomitoria*) and lower level entrances into the orchestra (*parodoi*).<sup>15</sup> While most theatres of the Roman period were constructed on flat ground, with the *cavea* supported on artificial vaulted substructures, the natural slope of the land was often incorporated into the design in the Near East, thereby reducing the required substructures.

The stage itself (*pulpitum*) was normally constructed of wood, and was low and deep in comparison to the stage of a Greek theatre. The front of the stage (*proscenium*), however, was a stone construction, usually articulated with a series of alternating rectilinear and rounded niches across the central segment, and with staircases at either end leading from the orchestra to the stage floor. Waterspouts for fountains were sometimes set into the upper portion of the niches.<sup>16</sup> The orchestra paving was usually composed of ashlar laid in a rectilinear pattern in front of the stage and in a semicircular pattern within the arc of the *cavea*.<sup>17</sup>

There were usually three doors in the back wall of the *scaena*, the central one called the *valvae regiae* and the lateral ones called the *valvae hospitales*, as well as entrances in each side wall, termed the *versurae*. A corridor (*postscaenium*) ran behind the *scaena*, providing access to the stage doors and leading to the exterior of

<sup>12</sup> On the laws on building in Rome, see Lim 1999: 266; *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.11 (issued in 364), 15.1.16 (issued in 365), 15.1.17 (issued in 376), 15.1.19 (issued in 376).

<sup>13</sup> For these patterns in the urban history of Scythopolis, for example, see Tsafirir and Foerster 1994: 102–110. Renewed prosperity is attested throughout the East in the late fifth and sixth centuries (Cameron 1993b: 178–180).

<sup>14</sup> For labelled plans and elevations designating the architectural components of a Roman theatre, see Sear 1990.

<sup>15</sup> On theatres in the Greek East, I follow Coupel and Frézouls (1956: 129–131), who employed the Greek term *parodos* rather than the Latin term *aditus maximus*.

<sup>16</sup> See Formigé 1914: 15; Fuchs 1987: 141–143; Stillwell 1952: 42. In the Near East, installations for fountains are found at Philadelphia (Fakharani 1975: 392) and Caesarea (Frova 1966: 183).

<sup>17</sup> Normally the paving was composed of the primary construction material, often limestone. The orchestras at Cyrrhus, Gadara, Neapolis, Scythopolis, however, were probably paved in marble. At Daphne and the North Theatre at Gerasa the paving was *opus sectile*. At Byblos, the floor was laid with a fine mosaic depicting Dionysos.

the structure. A colonnaded court was sometimes located behind the *postscaenium* for gatherings before and after the performance.

The *cavea* comprised one, two, or three horizontal sections (*maeniana*), with walkways (*praecinctiones*) located between them, and a colonnade at the summit. The *cavea* was further divided by staircases into radial sections (*cunei*). Sanctuaries were sometimes located at the top of the *cavea* on the central axis.<sup>18</sup> Special seats were reserved for officials in boxes (*tribunalia*) located over the entrances to the *parodoi*, in the orchestra, or in designated sections of the lower *cavea*. According to Livy (34.44.5), social division of seating areas in the theatre began in 194 B.C. Under the laws of Augustus, the structure of the city tended to be reproduced in the seating arrangements (Suet. *Aug.* 40.1); political and social divisions are evident throughout the imperial period in the provinces as well.<sup>19</sup>

Extensive excavation has been conducted at twenty-six of the thirty-nine theatres in the Near East whose location is securely known; these form the core of the following architectural typology (Map: Fig. 1). Previous typologies have focused on the design of the *scaenae frons*, and on the relationship between the theatre and the urban plan.<sup>20</sup>

This study addresses in particular the design of the orchestra, its relationship to the *cavea* and the stage, and the function of various architectural components.<sup>21</sup> Three basic types of orchestra design are outlined here as a basis from which to interpret later phases of remodelling.<sup>22</sup>

### *Type 1: Hellenistic Style*

Two of the earliest theatres, at Caesarea (Herodian phase) and Petra (Nabataean phase), include certain features associated with Hellenistic design. In both cases, the original *cavea* joined directly with the orchestra floor, with no

<sup>18</sup> At Philadelphia (Fakharani 1975: 387), a sanctuary was built above the *cavea*, comparable to the shrine of Ceres in the theatre at Lepcis Magna (see Caputo 1987: 1.61–66).

<sup>19</sup> See Csapo and Slater 1995: 306–307; Kolendo 1981; Rawson 1987; Polacco 1981.

<sup>20</sup> Bieber 1961: 209; Fiechter 1914: 112–115; Frézouls 1982: 412 and 1989: 404–405.

<sup>21</sup> This study is not intended to supplant earlier typologies, but rather to expand analysis into an area that has received little attention.

<sup>22</sup> A few small theatrical structures, whose function is uncertain, fall outside of these three types. The function of a small mud brick theatre near the sanctuary of Artemis Nanaia at Dura Europos has been a matter of debate; French excavators originally interpreted it as a cultic theatre associated with the sanctuary (Cumont 1926: 202), while American archaeologists interpreted it as a *bouleuterion* (Pillet 1932: 23). It is also unclear whether the small theatron within the “Great Temple” at Petra primarily served a ritual or administrative function (see Schluntz 1999). At Gadara, Gerasa, Philadelphia, Scythopolis, and Soada (Soueida), where two urban theatre structures are known, the smaller one was perhaps intended as an *odeion* or *bouleuterion*, or both. In most respects, however, these were designed with the same features as other theatres in the region, their small size being their main distinguishing feature. On the problem of the architectural identity of *odeia* and *bouleuteria*, see Gros 1996: 308–316.

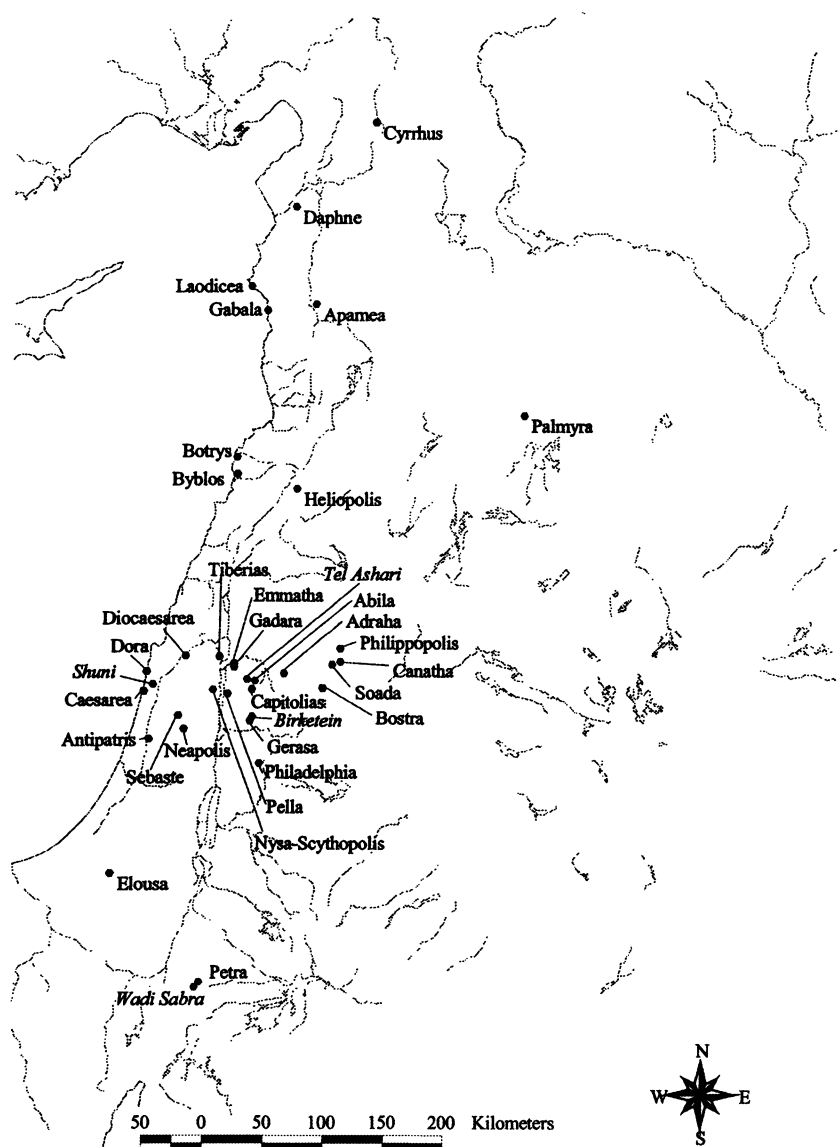


Fig. 1. Sites with architectural remains of theatres.

podium dividing the two areas.<sup>23</sup> At Caesarea, a water channel (*euripus*) ran the circumference of the orchestra, crossed the *parodoi*, and issued behind the stage, as at Oropos, Priene, and the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens.<sup>24</sup> The orchestra floors at both Caesarea and Petra were finished in plaster, which is unusual at later theatres. At Caesarea, the plaster was repaired and repainted many times with colourful geometric designs.<sup>25</sup> At Petra, the orchestra was hewn to an even level in the bedrock and finished with a hard plaster that covered the tying anchors used during construction; it is not known whether the plaster here was originally painted.<sup>26</sup>

The theatre at Byblos, dated to the early third century on the basis of the discovery of a coin of Elagabalus at its foundation levels, is something of an architectural anomaly in this region. The exquisite mosaic floor depicting Dionysus is unique, the *proscenium* is exceptionally ornate, and the *cavea* runs directly down to the orchestra in Hellenistic fashion.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Type 2: Cavea Podium (Fig. 2)*

The second design type is found at many theatres in the region, including Antipatris (Tel Aphek), Birketein (near Gerasa), Bosra (Bosra Eski Cham), Canatha (Kanawat), Caesarea (Imperial phase), Diocaesarea (Sepphoris), Gabala (Djeble), Gadara (Umm Qeis), Gerasa (Jerash, North and South Theatres), Pella (Tabaqat Fahil), Philadelphia (Amman, Large and Small Theatres), Philippopolis (Shahba), Scythopolis (Beth Shean, Large and Small Theatres), Sebaste (Sebastiya), and Wadi Sabra (near Petra). The defining characteristic of this type is found in the transition from the orchestra to the *cavea*, which is marked by low, broad steps (*bisellia*), and a podium rising to a height of approximately 1 m, ornamented with *cyma* mouldings. Three staircases, one at either end of the *cavea* podium and one on the central axis, lead to a walkway on top of the podium, from which the staircases in the *cavea* proper are accessed.<sup>28</sup>

Cuttings in the ends of the *proscenium*, sides of the *cavea* podium, and paving indicate the location of gates at the *parodoi*; the gates themselves, made of wood or metal, have not survived. Typically, the staircases to the *cavea* podium are located on the *parodos* side of the gates, while the staircases leading from the orchestra to the stage are located within the orchestra space, on the opposite side of the gates. The gates at the *parodoi* thus divided the public space of the *cavea* from the elite

<sup>23</sup> On the design of the orchestra in the Hellenistic period, see Bieber 1961: 127–128, with figs. 427–428 (Oropos), figs. 438–439 (New Pleuron), figs. 445–448 (Ephesus), figs. 449–450 (Delos), figs. 452–454 (Eretria), and figs. 457–459 (Oeniadae). For Caesarea, see Frova 1966: fig. 64. For Petra, see Hammond 1965: 22.

<sup>24</sup> Frova 1966: 88, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Frova 1966: 93–112.

<sup>26</sup> Hammond 1965: 20. The plaster is no longer preserved at any place on the orchestra floor.

<sup>27</sup> Dunand *et al.* 1954: 41–66.

<sup>28</sup> A variation on this circulation pattern is found at Antipatris, Caesarea (imperial phase), and Gabala, where all staircases in the *cavea* cut through the podium to orchestra level.

space in the orchestra occupied by dignitaries seated on the *bisellia*.<sup>29</sup> Altars found at several theatres also confirm the function of the orchestra as a ritual space.<sup>30</sup>

*Type 3: Parapet (Fig.3)*

This group of theatres is distinguished by the presence of a freestanding parapet around the orchestra.<sup>31</sup> There are fewer examples of this design type, and it is less standardized than the former. The parapets are composed of orthostats set into the orchestra floor, forming a screen approximately 1 m high. A circumferential passageway, approximately 1 m wide, allows circulation between the parapet and the base of the *cavea*. A variant is found at Adraha (Der'a) and Scythopolis, where the parapet takes the form of a continuous stone bench, with a circumferential passageway between the bench and the *cavea*. At Scythopolis the circumferential passage is at orchestra level, while at Adraha it is raised and accessed by two steps up from the orchestra. A second variant occurs at Daphne, where a series of cuttings indicate the location of a parapet constructed of perishable materials, with room for a walkway between it and the *cavea*.<sup>32</sup> The parapet probably functioned primarily as a divider of social space, with temporary seating for the elite placed against its interior face.

The arrangement at the base of the *cavea* does not follow a fixed design at these theatres. At Cyrrhus (Nebi Uri) and Scythopolis, there is a true *cavea* podium rising behind the parapet, measuring approximately 1 m high, and comparable to the podia at Type 2 theatres. At Apamea, Neapolis, and Palmyra, however, the bottom tier of seats is too low to constitute a true podium. Regardless of whether or not there was a *cavea* podium, all the staircases from the *cavea* join directly with the circumferential passageway.

In addition to the *paradoi*, there is at Palmyra a ground-level entrance on the central axis of the theatre, running beneath the *cavea* into the orchestra. Such an entrance is otherwise unattested in the Near East, though it has parallels elsewhere in the empire.<sup>33</sup> At Adraha, a central entrance from the orchestra leads to a narrow tunnel, roughly hewn in the bedrock beneath the semi-circle of the *cavea*, and opening onto the street behind the stage. It is possible that the tunnel was designed to serve as a special entrance for those seated in the orchestra, as at Palmyra, but that it was left unfinished.

<sup>29</sup> See Vitruvius, *De arch.* 6.2 and the "Lex Coloniae Genetivae Juliae" (*FIRA* 1.28, 126–127). We do not know precisely which dignitaries would have sat in these places of honour in imperial theatres in the Near East.

<sup>30</sup> On processions and rituals in the theatre, see Gebhard 1996: 113–127.

<sup>31</sup> The term *balteus* is avoided because of its mixed usage and unclear definition. Some scholars define the *balteus* as a walkway running round the auditorium, giving access to the seats (*OLD*, based on a passage in Calp. Sic. *Ecl.* 7.47). Others employ *balteus* to denote a parapet around the orchestra. Coupel and Frézouls (1956: 131) acknowledge both usages.

<sup>32</sup> Wilber 1938: 71–72.

<sup>33</sup> At Ostia, the large central vaulted entrance leading from the *decumanus* into the orchestra belongs to a reconstruction phase dated to A.D. 195 (Calza 1927).

## III. ARCHITECTURAL REMODELLING

The abandonment of theatres as venues for performance appears to have been a gradual process. Some were abandoned after the A.D. 363 earthquake, which caused severe damage to many cities in the region.<sup>34</sup> There is evidence, however, for the restoration and continued use of theatres into the fifth and sixth centuries at several sites.<sup>35</sup> Given that most theatres were built in the late first to early third centuries, there was a significant period of time during which general maintenance of the structure would have been required. It is precisely that period, between the late third and early sixth centuries, that forms the focus of the following four architectural case studies at Bostra, Caesarea, Neapolis, and Petra.

*Bostra*

Constructed in local basalt with limestone detailing, the theatre at Bostra is one of the best preserved in the Roman world. It probably dates to the second century, and has all the most typical features, including a Type 2 orchestra with a 1.40 m high podium.<sup>36</sup> The primary architectural phase has been well recorded with plans, elevations, and section drawings.<sup>37</sup> Alterations were later made to the orchestra, including the installation of a monumental gateway at the west *parodos*, the application of plaster on the *cavea* podium and *proscenium*, and the addition of a staircase at the centre of the *proscenium* joining the orchestra and the stage. These modifications have previously gone unnoted.

A *terminus post quem* for this secondary phase is suggested by inscriptions honouring Caracalla and Geta on two reused altars that were installed as doorjambs for a gate at the west *parodos* (Fig.4).<sup>38</sup> The southern altar is bonded to the *cavea* podium with rubble and mortar fill, while the northern altar is set out from the *proscenium* by 70 cm; cuttings on the east face of the altars and circular postholes in the base mouldings indicate that the gate could be closed with double doors.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>On the chronology of earthquakes in the Near East, see Russell 1985: 39. The theatres at Antipatris (Beck and Kochavi 1993: 71), Diocaesarea (Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1987: 278), and the Small Theatre at Philadelphia (Hadidi 1989: 166) appear to have gone out of use after the A.D. 363 earthquake.

<sup>35</sup>The theatres at Caesarea (Holum and Raban 1993: 284), Daphne (Wilber 1938: 59), Neapolis (Pommerantz 1983: 90–92), Scythopolis (Tsafir and Foerster 1994: 102), and Shuni (Shenhav 1993: 1383) were used into the fifth or sixth century.

<sup>36</sup>The theatre was probably constructed at the time of Trajan, when Bostra was made the capital of Arabia (Frézouls 1959: 222). Freyberger (1988: 18, 26) has suggested a later date, based on the architectural sculpture, but that analysis includes some features belonging to the later remodelling phase.

<sup>37</sup>See Finsen 1972. The archaeological data from the Syrian Department of Antiquities excavations remain at present unpublished.

<sup>38</sup>Sartre 1982: 89. On the faces turned towards the *parodos*, the altars carry identical Latin inscriptions set inside wreaths. The inscriptions read: *Vict(oria) Aug[ustorum duorum]*. The hammered out letter *G* on the second line indicates a dedication to the two *Augusti*.

<sup>39</sup>It is uncertain whether a similar gate was installed at the east *parodos*; cuttings in the side of the *cavea* podium and the *proscenium* suggest the presence of an installation that has not been preserved.



The space between the two altars forms an entrance 1.20 m wide. A narrow retaining wall was also constructed along the side of the staircase to the *cavea* podium, running up to the south doorjamb. The two lower courses of the wall were hewn to conform to the outline of the base moulding on the altars.

The face of the *cavea* podium, including the crown moulding, was covered with plaster. Two distinct coats can be discerned: a coarse undercoat, including charcoal and ceramic aggregate with an average size of 3 mm, and a fine polished overcoat. The plaster obscured the detailed articulation of the mouldings and filled in a row of attachment holes previously used to secure appliqué decoration. Plaster was also applied to the niches in the *proscenium* (Fig. 5). At the base of the niches, a makeshift moulding was created using filler faced with reused marble revetment and plaster. This stone-lined base moulding was probably intended to protect the plastered niches from water damage incurred from the shallow gutter running along the front of the *proscenium*. A staircase was also constructed into a rectilinear niche at the centre of the *proscenium*. Measuring 1.15 m in width, and originally composed of six ashlar steps, it was bonded to the orchestra floor with plastered rubble, overlapping the gutter in front of the stage.

The plaster on the *proscenium* niches and *cavea* podium bonds to the *proscenium* staircase and to the doorjambs, indicating the contemporaneous installation of these features in the orchestra. In addition, alterations beyond the orchestra space are suggested by secondary features on the stage visible in a photograph from the 1950s.<sup>40</sup> The eastern *valvae hospitales* is crossed by a narrow wall, approximately the same height as the podium of the *scaenae frons*, and a narrow staircase or buttress is built up to it. The chronological relationship of this feature to the changes noted in the orchestra is unclear.

Spatial organization was not fundamentally changed in this period of remodelling at Bostra, and in fact at virtually every theatre in the region there are cuttings at the *parodoi* indicating the presence of gates made of wood or metal. What is new, however, is the monumentalization of the gates, partially employing permanent materials. The addition of a staircase in the centre of the *proscenium* has parallels outside the Near East, at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens for example.<sup>41</sup> M. Bieber has described the feature at Athens, dated to about A.D. 270, as a stone version of the wooden *phlyakes* stairs often seen on vases depicting Italian popular comedy.<sup>42</sup> Access between the stage and the orchestra is now made permanent with steps made of stone.

### Caesarea

The initial construction of the theatre at Caesarea is dated by Josephus to the time of Herod, but the structure was completely rebuilt in the imperial

<sup>40</sup> Frézouls 1952: pl. 10, photo 18.

<sup>41</sup> See Pickard-Cambridge 1946: 260–261.

<sup>42</sup> Bieber 1961: 215. For a depiction of *phlyakes* steps on a South Italian crater, see Bieber 1961: fig. 507.

period, probably in the early second century.<sup>43</sup> The theatre was excavated by the Italian Mission to Caesarea headed by A. Frova from 1959 to 1964, precisely during the time that G. Traversari's book on water spectacles in late antiquity was published.<sup>44</sup> Traversari's hypothesis had a profound influence on Frova's interpretation of the later phases of remodelling at the Caesarea theatre.

Traversari proposed that theatres in Asia, Greece, and Italy were converted in late antiquity for the performance of aquatic mimes (*tetimimi*) in the orchestra. The tradition, he postulated, began in the Near East in the late first century A.D., and continued until at least the fourth century in this region. Certain architectural modifications would be required for such spectacles to be produced, including the blocking of the *parodoi* to create a basin, the sealing of that basin with waterproof plaster, a major water input system, and an appropriate drainage system. Various theatres seemed to have one or some of these design features, though it should be noted that no single theatre included them all. Recognizing features that Traversari had pointed out, Frova suggested that the theatre at Caesarea served this function in late antiquity. Conversely, it is argued here that the remodelling of the theatre at Caesarea is similar in many ways to that seen at Bostra and other theatres in the Near East. The alterations in fact say quite different things about the role and function of theatres in late antique cities.<sup>45</sup>

The imperial theatre had most of the usual design features, including a Type 2 orchestra with a 1 m high podium. But instead of the standard set of three staircases through the *cavea* podium, which restricted traffic to the orchestra to the central axis and the *parodoi*, all the *cavea* staircases descended straight to the orchestra floor.<sup>46</sup> The later phase of remodelling in the orchestra included the filling of the *proscenium* niches, the construction of a wall around the base of the *cavea*, the addition of stone gates at the *parodoi*, and extensive plastering. The spaces between the piers supporting the original wooden stage were also filled at this time, and the stage was partially paved in mosaic. Late-fourth and early-fifth-century material in associated fill provides a date for the remodelling phase as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

Frova reported discovering a late staircase built against the south sector of the *proscenium*, joining the orchestra and stage, similar to that described at Bostra.<sup>48</sup> But the remodelling of the *proscenium* as a whole was more extensive at Caesarea. Rather than being coated with layers of plaster, the niches at Caesarea were filled

<sup>43</sup> For the Herodian theatre, see *BJ* 1.21.8, 415. For the date of the imperial phase, see Holum and Raban 1993: 282–283.

<sup>44</sup> Frova 1966; Traversari 1960. See also earlier articles by Traversari (1950, 1952).

<sup>45</sup> For a new interpretation of Traversari's literary testimony for water spectacles, see Retzleff 2003.

<sup>46</sup> The same arrangement for the staircases is found at the nearby site of Antipatris. At Gabala narrow double staircases run parallel to the face of the podium, and deep cuttings indicate that access from the orchestra could be barred.

<sup>47</sup> Frova 1966: 146, 184.

<sup>48</sup> Frova 1966: 91.

with rubble and blocked by an ashlar wall running in front of the fill. The wall was covered with pink mortar and faced with reused marble revetment.<sup>49</sup> Niches in the *proscenium* were a ubiquitous design feature, and served a practical function. Excavations at Carthage and Lepcis Magna, for example, have shown that the niches held cultic items such as statuettes, altars, and candelabra.<sup>50</sup> These items, along with the altars found in numerous theatres in the Near East, tie into the use of the orchestra as a ritual space.<sup>51</sup> When the niches were filled in, one location for display of related cult items in the theatre at Caesarea was obliterated.

A rubble wall, now preserved only to a height of 47 cm, was constructed at the base of the *cavea* (Fig. 6). As with the wall in front of the *proscenium*, there is evidence here for facing with reused marble revetment set over pink mortar, and two low broad steps were set in the orchestra around the wall's interior face. Frova placed much importance on this wall for his interpretation of the late antique theatrical pool, but there was already a podium around the orchestra made of ashlar, which would have served a waterproofing function much more satisfactorily than something made of rubble and plaster. The construction of this wall instead suggests a reorganization of traffic flow in the orchestra, by which access was restricted to a more typical pattern. The original arrangement was unusual, with all the staircases from the *cavea* descending through the podium to the orchestra, rather than stopping at the top of the podium. The new rubble wall is best understood as a new *cavea* podium built in front of the old one, which blocked the lower portion of the *cavea* staircases. The space between the new and old podium walls was at least partially filled to support the typical walkway on top of the podium. The two steps built up to the interior face of the rubble wall are new *bisellia*, where the seating for dignitaries would have been set up.

Make-shift doorjambs, employing reused architectural members, were added to the *parodoi*; large fragments of lintel were placed against the *proscenium*, while pieces of pediment were set against the ends of the new *cavea* podium. These reused lintel and pediment blocks were covered with several layers of white plaster retaining traces of polychrome paint, and fitted with cuttings for double doors.<sup>52</sup> The gates restricted access from the *parodoi* to the orchestra, directing traffic to staircases at the ends of the podium, as was typical. This organization of space is confirmed by a staircase that Frova excavated at the north *parodos* (no longer *in situ*), which led to a landing between the old and new podia (Fig. 7).<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Frova 1966: 90, 97. Most of the wall and the material filling the niches were removed during excavation. The layering of materials is, however, still visible in the southernmost niche.

<sup>50</sup> See Fuchs 1987: 140–144.

<sup>51</sup> On cult in the theatre, see Hanson 1959.

<sup>52</sup> Frova 1966: 91, 183. The motifs on the painted plaster could not be discerned at the time of excavation.

<sup>53</sup> Frova 1966: 92. These gates, however, later went out of use, when they were blocked with plundered relief panels and covered with more mortar (Frova 1966: 90).

The date and nature of the remodelling suggest that it was a response to damage from the A.D. 363 earthquake. Much of the material used for revetment and construction comprised reused architectural members, which might have originated from the original imperial phase of the theatre. The presence of columns and sculpture in the fill under the stage suggests that the *scaenae frons* was at least partially destroyed by this time,<sup>54</sup> while the lintel and pediment blocks employed as doorjambs probably originated from the *scaenae frons*. The orchestra floor was also repaired with pink mortar, which may have been covered with a finer painted plaster like the doorjambs; such repairs may have been necessary if the *scaenae frons* came crashing down onto the orchestra paving.<sup>55</sup>

Because the hollow space under the original stage was filled in, the mechanism for the stage curtain (*aulaeum*) could no longer have functioned in its original capacity. Despite this, other renovations indicate that the stage remained in use: areas of paving were laid at either end of the stage, where the arches set over the original support piers had remained in place, and plain white mosaic paving was laid in front of the *valvae regiae*, from which a new staircase led to raised paving in the courtyard behind the theatre.<sup>56</sup> Evidence for remodelling in this period was also noted beyond the stage and the orchestra.<sup>57</sup> The floors of the *vomitoria* were repaved with the same type of mosaic as found in front of the *valvae regiae*, and traces of red, yellow, and blue painted plaster preserved on the back wall of the *scaena* and in the north *parodos* might also belong to the same phase.

Contrary to the notion proposed by Frova that activity now focused in the orchestra, these renovations made to the stage indicate that, as at Bostra, both spaces continued to be used. The staircase built up against the blocked *proscenium* niches confirms the continued connection between the stage and orchestra. Although the mechanism for the *aulaeum* no longer functioned and the *scaenae frons* was largely destroyed, the stage itself was nonetheless renovated and put back into use.

As at Bostra, finished plaster was also used extensively to mask and unify the underlying structural materials, which essentially comprised rubble and reused architectural components. Charcoal and ceramic aggregate in the plaster at Bostra and Caesarea might have rendered the plaster in this open-air space more resistant to damage from rainwater, but a distinction must be made between this superficial treatment and the thick layers of alternating materials used to render cisterns and aqueducts impermeable.<sup>58</sup> The pink mortar served as a structural material, primarily for bonding revetment slabs to the underlying fill materials. It is quite clear that neither the finished plaster (sometimes painted) nor the pink mortar were employed as waterproofing elements. Frova's proposal that the orchestra was

<sup>54</sup> Frova 1966: 183.

<sup>55</sup> The mortar was removed to expose the underlying pavement (Frova 1966: 97).

<sup>56</sup> The mosaic and staircase were dismantled during excavation (Frova 1966: 134–136, 183).

<sup>57</sup> Frova 1966: 182–183.

<sup>58</sup> On ancient plaster and mortar, see Porath 1984.

converted into a waterproof basin is also undermined by the lack of an appropriate hydraulic input system belonging to this phase.<sup>59</sup> The central drainage system continued to be used in its original capacity, with the addition of a new drainage channel running through the fill under the stage; other portions of the main drain channel were repaired.<sup>60</sup>

The remodelling of the theatre at Caesarea is best understood in the context of local architectural design traditions. Caesarea experienced a major period of urban renewal in the sixth century, beginning with the construction of the new defense system in the mid-fifth century; streets were repaved, and a number of new buildings were constructed, including baths and villas.<sup>61</sup> But much less construction is attributable to the fourth and early fifth centuries, and it is not surprising to find Caesarea patching up and making the best of its old imperial theatre during this time. The theatre was finally abandoned as a place of entertainment in the mid-fifth to early sixth century, and it was incorporated into a *kastron* built inside the new city walls.<sup>62</sup>

### *Neapolis*

The early second century theatre at Neapolis was originally built with a Type 3 orchestra, with a 1 m high parapet composed of limestone orthostats.<sup>63</sup> Cuttings in the orchestra paving indicate the location of gates through the parapet in front of every staircase in the *cavea*, and although the presence of modern houses has precluded excavation in the stage area, other evidence for extensive remodelling is found in the orchestra space. Attributed by the excavator Y. Magen to the early Byzantine period, alterations include the construction of a raised passage behind the parapet, the blocking of the parapet gates, and the application of plaster throughout the orchestra.<sup>64</sup> Like Frova at Caesarea, Magen associated these alterations with the conversion of the orchestra into a pool for the performance of aquatic spectacles.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup>The only substantial input system consists of a double pool at the north end of the structure, which led to a terracotta pipe running down the north *versura* to an opening in the back of the northern *proscenium* niche, from which a small fountain issued. Although Frova (1966: 114) at one point discussed this system as part of the input for the putative orchestral basin, he concluded (1966: 183) that it must belong to an earlier phase and that it represented a small-scale installation in the *proscenium* (above, n. 16). A channel at the southern end of the stage postdates the blocking of the *proscenium*, but its source from a tank installed in the southern exedra of the *scaenae frons* suggests that it belongs to later period, after the stage went out of use (Frova 1966: 182, 131).

<sup>60</sup>Frova 1966: 146.

<sup>61</sup>See Holum and Raban 1993: 284–285.

<sup>62</sup>Frova 1966: 184.

<sup>63</sup>The foundation of Neapolis in A.D. 72–73 provides a *terminus post quem* for all monumental construction there. Excavator Y. Magen (1993: 1355) proposed that the theatre was part of a large building project at the beginning of the second century.

<sup>64</sup>Magen 1993: 1356–57.

<sup>65</sup>Magen 1993: 1357.

The original gates in the parapet were blocked with rubble and ashlar, and a deep layer of fill was deposited behind the parapet, covering the circumferential passageway and the lowest tier of seats in the *cavea* (Fig. 8). The joins between the original parapet and the ashlar blocking the gateways were sealed with plaster to create a continuous wall at the base of the *cavea*. The top of the fill deposited behind this wall was paved with black and white mosaics arranged in a lozenge pattern.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the orchestra floor, which originally might have been paved in coloured marbles, was apparently refinished in plaster.<sup>67</sup> As in other renovations employing reused architectural blocks and rubble, plastering over the underlying construction materials created the appearance of a unified installation.

A system of clay pipes in the orchestra remained in use in the early Byzantine period, but no water supply system was identified during the excavations that would support Magen's proposal that the orchestra was turned into a watertight basin.<sup>68</sup> The remodelling at Neapolis did, however, result in a significant alteration in the organization of space. The mosaic paving on top of the fill layer behind the parapet suggests that this area now served as a raised walkway around the base of the *cavea*, as was typical in the Type 2 design. In fact, the changes made at Neapolis in late antiquity resulted in a full conversion from a Type 3 orchestra with a parapet to a more common Type 2 design with a *cavea* podium. The podium rose to a height of 1 m, that is, the height of the old parapet that comprised its interior face.

### *Petra*

The Nabataean theatre at Petra, dated to the early first century A.D., is among the earliest known in the Near East.<sup>69</sup> The design was in many respects typical, although it had a Type 1 Hellenistic style orchestra, without a *cavea* podium or parapet.<sup>70</sup> A later phase of remodelling, probably dating to the early Byzantine

<sup>66</sup> Pommerantz 1983: 91. These mosaics are no longer extant; the top of the fill now consists of small cobbles and larger limestone blocks set in hard white mortar. The fill is preserved to a height of about 85 cm, i.e., 10 cm below the top of the parapet and 30 cm above the lowest seat in the *cavea*.

<sup>67</sup> Marble fragments found in the fill might have come from the original orchestra floor, as the marble paving was replaced with plaster in this phase of remodelling (Pommerantz 1983: 91).

<sup>68</sup> Magen 1993: 1356–57; Pommerantz 1983: 91.

<sup>69</sup> Excavator P. Hammond (1965: 63) attributed construction to Aretas IV (9 B.C. to A.D. 40) on historical grounds. Several early architectural features, such as the Nabataean capitals and mouldings, seem to corroborate this early date (McKenzie 1990: 43). The design of the theatre and the discovery of sculptures of Roman deities from the *scaenae frons* suggest its function as a regular Roman theatre used for entertainment and assemblies, perhaps a reflection of Aretas IV's cosmopolitan outlook (on Nabataean Hellenism, see Glueck 1965: 39, Bowersock 1983: 61). An opposing view maintains that the theatre's location in the midst of the necropolis denotes a cultic function related to the performance of funerary rites (Negev 1993: 1184).

<sup>70</sup> Above, n. 23.

period, significantly altered the character of the orchestra space.<sup>71</sup> The *proscenium* niches were filled, new staircases were added against the *proscenium*, and a wall was built at the base of the *cavea*. Though excavator P. Hammond described this phase (1C) in some detail, no particular significance was attached to these architectural modifications.

The alternating rectilinear and rounded *proscenium* niches were filled with rubble, and an ashlar wall was constructed in front and covered with plaster, much in the same manner as at Caesarea (Fig. 9). The *proscenium* thus no longer served as a location for the display of items such as statuettes, candelabra, and altars. In addition, two narrow staircases joining the orchestra and stage were bonded to the *proscenium* wall with rubble and plaster, as at Bostra and Caesarea.<sup>72</sup> Two post blocks, made of plastered rubble and reused materials, were also set on the orchestra floor next to the *proscenium*.<sup>73</sup> These blocks might have supported posts for a stage curtain after the original *aulaeum* went out of use, when the stage was paved with limestone slabs.

A thick wall composed of ashlar with cemented joints (Fig. 10) was constructed at the base of the *cavea*, and is preserved in four courses to a height of 1.10 m.<sup>74</sup> The side of the wall facing the orchestra was covered with a layer of plaster approximately 1 cm thick, widening to form a wedge at the join with the orchestra floor. The side facing the *cavea* was not finished with plaster; rather, the presence of rubble fill suggests that the wall was constructed up to and over the lower portion of the *cavea*. Four masonry steps bonded to the orchestra side of the wall, in alignment with the central staircase in the *cavea*, led from the orchestra up to the central *cavea* staircase. The presence of this staircase elucidates the function of the wall around the orchestra as a typical Type 2 *cavea* podium, complete with a staircase on the central axis.

The circulation patterns in the orchestra were thus significantly altered with the addition of this podium. There are no clear indications of remodelling in the stage area, but communication between the orchestra and stage was made permanent with the addition of two flights of steps, indicating that both the stage and orchestra remained in use. As at Caesarea, the alterations updated the design of the orchestra to include a typical Type 2 *cavea* podium, and the filling of the *proscenium* niches prevented the display of cult items. Plaster was used extensively at Petra for facing the sandstone

<sup>71</sup>This major phase of architectural remodelling was associated, on the basis of historical probability, with the Roman annexation of Nabataea in A.D. 106 (Hammond 1965: 63). Stylistic similarities to remodelling attested at other theatres in the region, however, suggest that this phase dates to the fourth or fifth century.

<sup>72</sup>Hammond 1965: 23, 35.

<sup>73</sup>Hammond 1965: 34.

<sup>74</sup>Hammond (1965: 31) felt that the function of this wall could not be explained because of the later construction directly behind it.

architecture; it is thus not surprising to find plaster throughout the theatre here.<sup>75</sup>

### *Regional Analysis*

At Antioch and at Gerasa's North Theatre, the auditoria were apparently enlarged to accommodate growing populations.<sup>76</sup> But the remodelling of most theatres was made in the later empire, reflecting concerns similar to those attested at Bostra, Caesarea, Neapolis, and Petra.

The theatre at Daphne was abandoned for a short time following an earthquake in the mid-fourth century, but was soon put back into use.<sup>77</sup> The rebuilding involved much of the orchestra and stage, yet the paucity of carved material from this period suggests that decoration was either reused from the first period or kept to a minimum.<sup>78</sup> The North Theatre at Gerasa was reworked again in the early fifth century.<sup>79</sup> As at Caesarea, the area beneath the stage was filled with various materials, including *opus sectile*, painted plaster, marble veneer, and statuary, suggesting that the *scaenae frons* had at least partially collapsed by this time. At Elousa, epigraphic evidence attests to the renovation of the orchestra paving in A.D. 454/5.<sup>80</sup> At Scythopolis, paving was laid on the stage over a fill including architectural elements, indicating that this area was put back into use after the earthquake of 363.<sup>81</sup> At Sebaste, columns from the *scaenae frons* were uncovered beneath a late occupation layer in the orchestra that was rich in coins from the fourth to fifth centuries A.D.,<sup>82</sup> suggesting that the theatre remained in use despite the collapse of the *scaenae frons*.<sup>83</sup> At Shuni, the orchestra was repaved and the theatre also continued to be used after the *scaenae frons* was destroyed or dismantled.<sup>84</sup>

Inscriptions supplement the architectural evidence, also suggesting continued use in this period. An inscribed stele from the South Theatre at Gerasa honouring Constantius attests to its use at the turn of the fourth century,<sup>85</sup> and at Apamea,

<sup>75</sup> Shear 1997.

<sup>76</sup> For Antioch, see Malal. 9.14 (222). For Gerasa, see Clark *et al.* 1986: 227.

<sup>77</sup> Wilber 1938: 59.

<sup>78</sup> Wilber 1938: 62. It should also be noted that, despite the assertion that the theatre served "from the beginning as a *naumachia*" (Wilber 1938: 61), the evidence for hydraulic installations here is inconclusive and the systems described are hypothetical. The only period during which Wilber (1938: 62–69) consistently maintained the possibility of a fountain in the orchestra was in the "intermediate period," which lasted about fifty years; even in this case, it is not clear whether the installation served as a fountain or a drain.

<sup>79</sup> Clark *et al.* 1986: 233.

<sup>80</sup> Negev 1981: 73.

<sup>81</sup> Mazor 1987–88: 19–20.

<sup>82</sup> Zayadine 1966: 579.

<sup>83</sup> Crowfoot *et al.* 1942: 61.

<sup>84</sup> Shenhav 1993: 1383.

<sup>85</sup> Welles 1938: 431, no. 161.



two inscriptions from A.D. 360 were discovered in the orchestra.<sup>86</sup> At the Birketein sanctuary outside of Gerasa, an inscription dated A.D. 535 refers to the Maioumas festival, which presumably involved activities in the small theatre located there.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. THEATER AND THE CITY

##### *Spectacle Venues*

Overall, there is a striking paucity of literary and epigraphic evidence from the imperial period relating to gladiators or *munerarii* in the Near East.<sup>88</sup> But the discovery of amphitheatres at Bostra, Caesarea, Dura Europus, Eleutheropolis (Bet Guvrin), possibly Legio (Meggido), and Scythopolis, confirms the dissemination of arena spectacles in this region.<sup>89</sup> Literary sources also record the construction of amphitheatres in Antioch, Jericho, Jerusalem, and Laodicea.<sup>90</sup> These localities generally conform to a pattern previously observed that amphitheatres tended to be built in provincial capitals, Roman colonies, and places with a substantial Roman presence.<sup>91</sup> Additional venues also accommodated arena spectacles. Graffiti from the *palaestra* at Sebaste suggest that gladiatorial combat might have been held there.<sup>92</sup> The hippodromes at Caesarea, Gerasa, and Neapolis were truncated in the late Roman period to function as arenas.<sup>93</sup>

In contrast to numerous examples in Greece and Asia Minor, however, the theatres in the Near East show no sign of having been designed for, or adapted to accommodate, gladiatorial games or *venationes*.<sup>94</sup> Although most theatres have either a parapet or a podium at the base of the *cavea*, these are too low to constitute

<sup>86</sup> Barlet 1972: 156.

<sup>87</sup> Welles 1938: 470–471, no. 279.

<sup>88</sup> Robert 1940: 241–243.

<sup>89</sup> For a summary of amphitheatres in this region, see Weiss 1999.

<sup>90</sup> Antioch (Malal. 13.30, 339), Jerusalem (*AJ* 15.8.1, 268), Jericho (*AJ* 17.161), Laodicea (Malal. 12.21, 294).

<sup>91</sup> Welch 1999: 137. At Dura, an inscription records the dedication of the amphitheatre in A.D. 216 by the *vexillarii* of the IV Scythian and III Cyrenaic legions (Robert 1940: 125, no. 71). Legio was originally founded as a military camp for the legion VI Ferrata (see Avi-Yonah 1977: 141 on the history of the city). Bostra, Caesarea, and Scythopolis, were all provincial capitals at some time.

<sup>92</sup> Crowfoot *et al.* 1942: 42.

<sup>93</sup> Gladiatorial spectacles were also presented in stadia in Greece and Asia Minor (Welch 1988). For Scythopolis, see Porath 1995: 22–23. For Neapolis, see Magen 1993: 1357. For Gerasa, see Humphrey 1986: 498.

<sup>94</sup> Golvin (1988: 246–247) concluded, despite the rather misleading list of “théâtres-amphithéâtres de Syrie-Palestine” in Table 23, that these were not true mixed edifices like those in Asia Minor. Frézouls (1982: 410) also noted that the orchestras in Syrian theatres were not transformed into arenas, as in Asia Minor, and that the parapets found in some theatres had nothing to do with the protection of spectators from wild beasts. An opposing view is represented by Segal (1995: 13–14, 39, n. 3), who suggested that many of the theatres in the Near East were used for aquatic and arena spectacles.

barriers between animals in the orchestra and spectators in the *cavea*.<sup>95</sup> Had a high barrier for protection from wild animals been intended, we might expect to find a supplementary post and net system, such as has been noted elsewhere.<sup>96</sup> Other features found in Greece and Asia Minor, such as doors in the *proscenium* leading beneath the stage and refuges in the *cavea* podium, are not found in these theatres.<sup>97</sup> Nor was the stage isolated from the orchestra, cut into, or reduced in importance.

Amphitheatres were introduced earlier here than elsewhere in the East, and there were fewer pre-existing Hellenistic stone theatres available for adaptation in the Roman period.<sup>98</sup> Thus both types of building could be constructed from the outset with the specific needs of the city in mind. A distinction must be maintained between this architectural tradition in the Near East and the mixed tradition found in Greece and Asia Minor, where older theatres were often transformed in the Roman period with new design features and sometimes a new function.<sup>99</sup> Theatrical representations retained their proper venue into the late antique period in this region.

### *Desacralization*

Despite the growing conflict between Roman theatre and Christian society, pagan spaces such as theatres were maintained throughout the Christian period, partially in response to the desire of the elite to maintain a connection to its past.<sup>100</sup> The principal value of public shows, even for pagan patrons, presumably lay in the celebrity and power gained rather than in any particular religious associations. Nonetheless, leading up to the ban on festivals by the Council of Trullo, a series of laws recorded in the *Theodosian Code* reflects a steady suppression of polytheistic worship.<sup>101</sup> The impact of these measures on traditional festivals is made clear in

<sup>95</sup> The podia at these theatres measure 1 to 1.50 m high, compared to about 3.50 m at Corinth, where ten rows of seats were cut away to create this height (Stillwell 1952: 87). The parapets also measure approximately 1 m high, compared to the arena-parapet at Perge measuring 2.30 m.

<sup>96</sup> On protective devices, see Gebhard 1975. In a few cases (North and South Theatres at Gerasa, Scythopolis), there are regular cuttings along the top of the *cavea* podium for securing a guardrail made of perishable materials. Although similar fixtures have sometimes been interpreted as indicative of a mixed function for the edifice (see Gebhard 1975: 47–52), there is little likelihood that the North Theatre at Gerasa, for example, with its fine *opus sectile* floor and its epigraphic designation as an “odeion,” was used for arena spectacles (see Clark *et al.* 1986). These installations are better understood as simple railings along the edge of the walkway on the *cavea* podium. A variant is found at Sebaste, where sockets are found along the *cavea* podium and towards the back of the first row of seats, suggesting that places of honour in the first row were separated by barriers both on the front and on the back (Zayadine 1966: 579).

<sup>97</sup> de Bernardi Ferrero 1974: 4.148–149; Golvin 1988: 246–247.

<sup>98</sup> Livy 41.20.11–13. See Edmondson 1999: 88; Frézouls 1989; Weiss 1999: 23–49.

<sup>99</sup> Bieber 1961: 190, 208.

<sup>100</sup> On sacred space and time, see Salzman 1999: 123.

<sup>101</sup> Above, nn. 8 and 9.

an edict of Arcadius and Honorius issued to Apollodorus, Proconsul of Africa, in A.D. 399:

*ut profanos ritus iam salubri lege submovimos, ita festos conventus civium et communem omnium laetitiam non patimur submoveri. unde absque ullo sacrificio atque ulla superstitione damnabili exhiberi populo voluptates secundum veterem consuetudinem, iniri etiam festa convivia, si quando exigunt publica vota, decernimus.* (Cod. Theod. 16.10.17)

As we have already abolished profane rites by a statutory law, we do not permit the common joy of all to be destroyed by abolishing the festive assemblies of the citizens; wherefore, we decree that the pleasures and convivial festivals of the people shall be conducted in accordance with the ancient customs, when the public wishes demand it, but that no sacrifices shall be offered, and no damnable superstition observed. (tr. Maas 2000: 177)

Public festivals continued to be produced in the fourth and fifth centuries, but an effort was made to remove cultic elements and to make theatre a desacralized event.<sup>102</sup> Despite such legislation, the exclusion of pagan ritual was not always enforced, as Augustine records in A.D. 408 (*Epist.* 91). Though best attested in North Africa, presumably such conflicts of interest occurred throughout the empire.

Within the traditional pagan framework, the theatre had been the site of sacrifices delivered on behalf of the safety of the rulers and gods and the eternal duration of their rule, as demonstrated by an inscription from Gytheum, near Sparta.<sup>103</sup> In the codex-calendar of A.D. 354, recording the festivals in Rome, 98 of the 177 days devoted to *ludi scaenici* and *circenses* were related to the imperial cult.<sup>104</sup> But evidence from the West suggests that, throughout the fourth century, the imperial cult was revised and reinvented to suit an increasingly Christian climate. When, for example, a new imperial cult centre was established in Hispellum (Umbria) under Constantine, permission was granted only with the understanding that activities would exclude *superstitio* (presumably here the performance of public sacrifice).<sup>105</sup> The imperial cult thus came to involve secular rather than religious honours and focused increasingly on certain moments in the life of the living emperor, such as *adventus*, *profectio*, and *natales*.

If similar restrictions were issued in the East, the attempt by authorities to make festivals (including those involving the imperial cult) essentially profane might at least partly account for the architectural form of theatres in late antiquity. When the niches in the *proscenium* were filled in, as at Caesarea and Petra, cultic items could no longer be displayed there. After the *scaenae frons* had collapsed, it could no longer hold the images of the imperial family, deities, and personifications, which had once been essential to the iconographic programmes of theatres. These statuary groups had been periodically added to and updated up

<sup>102</sup> On the desacralization of games, see Lim 1999: 167.

<sup>103</sup> SEG XI 923. On the imperial cult in theatres, see Price 1984: 210–211.

<sup>104</sup> On the imperial cult in late antique Rome, see Salzman 1990: 131–146.

<sup>105</sup> CIL XI.5265.

to the third century, but no portraits later than the Severan dynasty are known from excavations in theatres.<sup>106</sup> The fact that the *scaenae frons* was not usually repaired along with the stage suggests not only a lack of funds for such a project, but also a decreasing importance in the role of the sculpture.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

In its original form, the theatre at Bostra already adhered to the Type 2 orchestra design. The impact of the remodelling was greater at Caesarea, Neapolis, and Petra, where the creation of a *cavea* podium in late antiquity brought these theatres closer to a standard Type 2 design. The use of cheap and ready materials, especially plaster and reused architectural elements, sets them apart from theatres built earlier in the Roman period. The choice of materials was not, however, related to a functional conversion of the orchestra space, but rather to centuries of use and the damage from earthquakes which necessitated repair and renovation, work that the cities had limited resources to undertake.

The architectural remodelling attested in the later Roman period in fact was related to the perpetuation of standard elements that had been established in theatre design in the Near East by the second century A.D. The organization of traffic flow in the *cavea* and orchestra suggests that a traditional seating hierarchy was maintained in the later empire. Patrons and magistrates could still enter through gates at the *parodoi* and take a place of honour on the *bisellia* around the orchestra. The stage was still in use for performances, as suggested by various repairs and by the construction of permanent steps connecting the stage and orchestra.

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<sup>106</sup>For portraits from theatres in Italy and the western provinces, see Fuchs 1987: 166–180.

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## NEAR EASTERN THEATRES



Fig. 2. Type 2 Orchestra Design: Gerasa, North Theatre. View to the southeast.



Fig. 3. Type 3 Orchestra Design: Palmyra. View from the east *parodos* to the southwest.

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Fig. 4. Bostra. Architectural remodelling at the west *parodos*.



Fig. 5. Bostra. Architectural remodelling at the *proscaenium*, with staircase.

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Fig. 6. Caesarea. Architectural remodelling, with rubble wall and north *parodos* gate.



Fig. 8. Neapolis. Architectural remodelling of the parapet, with blocked gateway.

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Fig. 7. Caesarea. Architectural remodelling at the north *parodos* (from Frova 1966: fig. 78).

## NEAR EASTERN THEATRES



Fig. 9. Petra. Architectural remodelling, with blocked *proscenium* niche.



Fig. 10. Petra. Architectural remodelling, with *cavea* podium and staircase.