

Analysis of Recent Archaeological Work: The Theatre at Aphrodisias

Aphrodisias is situated in the north-eastern area of Caria close to the Maeander valley,¹ approximately 35km south of the Maeander River.² The remains of the ancient city, which was built over numerous prehistoric settlements dating as far back as the Early Bronze Age,³ are located on a high plateau approximately 600m above sea level at the foot of the Baba Dağ mountain range.⁴ A conical hill, around 15km high, is the area normally termed the ‘acropolis’ and the theatre is located on the eastern slope of this ‘acropolis’,⁵ which is in fact merely the larger of two prehistoric mounds which lie adjacent to the southern part of the agora.⁶ The site is near modern Karacasu in Turkey.⁷

The first excavation of the area of Aphrodisias was undertaken by the French, under Paul Gaudin, in 1904, although the findings from this remained unpublished.⁸ The French excavations continued from 1905-1913.⁹ The next phase was carried out by the Italians, led by Luigi Crema and G. Jacopi,¹⁰ from 1937-1939.¹¹ In 1961, Dr. K. T. Erim made the excavations at Aphrodisias his life’s work until his death in 1990.¹² The Acropolis-Theatre project was begun in 1966 and actively pursued for six years,¹³ and after this, in 1972, a restoration programme was initiated,¹⁴ which was concentrated on the theatre and the baths associated with it.¹⁵ The focus of the large-scale excavations occurring between 1961-1990

¹ Akurgal, (1970) 171.

² Ratté and Smith, (2004) 145.

³ Akurgal, (1970) 174.

⁴ Akurgal, (1970) 171.

⁵ Akurgal, (1970) 174.

⁶ Heffernan, (2003).

⁷ Heffernan, (2003).

⁸ Erim in Smith and Erim, (1991) 7, with the accompanying note from the author.

⁹ Heffernan, (2003).

¹⁰ Erim in Smith and Erim, (1991) 7.

¹¹ Heffernan, (2003).

¹² Heffernan, (2003).

¹³ Erim in Smith and Erim, (1991) 7.

¹⁴ Erim, (1975) 20.

¹⁵ Erim, (1983) 234.

was the uncovering of the numerous monumental and sacred buildings of the city,¹⁶ although research and further excavations have continued at the site after this date.¹⁷ Most notably, a geophysical survey done between 1995 and 1998 revealed that Aphrodisias was a planned town laid out in a rectangular grid.¹⁸

The theatre itself was originally built in the Hellenistic period, likely some time in the Late Hellenistic period, but it was extensively renovated in the Late Republican and Early Imperial periods.¹⁹ There appears to have been two major stages in these renovations, completed by the end of the first century CE – the stage and stage building were dedicated in 28BCE,²⁰ likely renovated between 38-28BCE,²¹ and then the auditorium was also redone, likely under the Julio-Claudians, as it was dedicated in 41CE, but the construction work may actually have continued after the dedication even into the Flavian period.²²

Despite the fact that theatres were generally built to a certain pattern,²³ there are several aspects of this particular theatre which make it important to ancient history. For example, the theatre is where the so-called ‘archive wall’ is located, which provides a large body of inscriptional evidence. This archive wall is in fact the southern wall of the north *parados*.²⁴ It was constructed from local marble blocks, terminating in a pilaster at the western end and probably also at the eastern end, although the original bricks from this section are lost.²⁵ The documents on the archive wall shed only episodic light on the history of Aphrodisias and Rome,²⁶ but there are important documents concerning Roman public

¹⁶ Ratté and Smith, (2004) 146.

¹⁷ Heffernan, (2003)

¹⁸ Ratté and Smith, (2004) 145.

¹⁹ Heffernan, (2003)

²⁰ Reynolds in Smith and Erim, (1991) 15.

²¹ Heffernan, (2003)

²² Reynolds in Smith and Erim, (1991) 15.

²³ Goodman, (2012) 163.

²⁴ Reynolds, (1982) xv.

²⁵ Reynolds, (1982) 33.

²⁶ Reynolds, (1982) 107.

procedures from the late part of the Republic,²⁷ specifically under the Second Triumvirate;²⁸ imperial communications from Trajan;²⁹ and an unusually high proportion of third century texts.³⁰ The latter section is especially useful, as they shed light on the ill-documented reigns of the emperors during the crisis-filled third century CE.³¹ It is possible that the restriction in the documents here was undertaken by choice rather than necessity, as most documents concern conferment of status upon Aphrodisias or the city's exemption from certain obligations.³² Given the limited space on the wall, this seems likely; furthermore the selection of texts connected to this aspect of the city and its inhabitants may be related to the dual use of the theatre as both a building for entertainment and as one for politics. This is particularly the case in the later Roman period, where the distinction between the functions of specific gatherings either for entertainment or for political purposes became increasingly blurred.³³

This political function can also be seen through the layout of the theatre, particularly the governor's seat, which not only represented imperial authority, but could also be utilised as a place where the governor could meet and address the people of the city or possibly even the province.³⁴ The theatre was useful for this function as the speaker could address the audience seated in the *cavea*, or turn and address people gathered in the nearby public square.³⁵ Formal assemblies became increasingly rare throughout the imperial period, however impromptu meetings may still have been held.³⁶ Another political function was in connection with visitors, particularly visiting dignitaries, at which point the theatre became a demonstration of the importance of Aphrodisias, designed to impress these guests.³⁷ The

²⁷ Reynolds, (1982) 40.

²⁸ Reynolds, (1982) 39.

²⁹ Reynolds, (1982) 107.

³⁰ Reynolds, (1982) 108.

³¹ Reynolds, (1982) 108.

³² Reynolds, (1982) 107.

³³ Roueché in Smith and Erim, (1991) 103.

³⁴ Roueché in Smith and Erim, (1991) 102.

³⁵ Heffernan, (2003)

³⁶ Roueché in Smith and Erim, (1991) 102.

³⁷ Roueché in Smith and Erim, (1991) 102.

archive wall could then serve to demonstrate to these visitors exactly the type of special relationship the city enjoyed with Rome, and particularly with the emperors themselves, as some emperors, such as Trajan, personally wrote communications to the city regarding the benefits which they were afforded.

Further discovered in the theatre were several statues – in fact, more than forty pieces of major statuary were uncovered in the theatre, and it has been stated that in no other theatre in the Greek East has been found such rich statuary decoration which is still preserved.³⁸ The statuary recovered from this structure during the excavations of the 1970's included figures of Apollo, several Victories, two Muses, two boxers, a Demos and a copy of the Polykleitan 'Diskophoros'.³⁹ With the exception of the two boxers, these statues were found on or above the stage, with some pieces having fallen into the *orchestra*.⁴⁰ These were most likely part of the *scaenae frons* itself. Moreover, most were found in the centre and northern sections of the stage, suggesting that this section collapsed at one moment.⁴¹ The statues of the two boxers were excavated in many fragments from the theatre and were subsequently restored and put on display in the Aphrodisias Museum.⁴² These were possibly only set up as a pair in later antiquity and were repaired substantially in ancient times, as well as the modern restorations.⁴³

There have also been many architectural finds, as well as many restorations of this aspect of the theatre. For example, the restorations in the late 1970's to early 1980's included the re-erection of five columns and three pillars in the 'Kaisersaal' of the baths connected to

³⁸ Erim and Smith in Smith and Erim, (1991) 67.

³⁹ <<http://www.nyu.edu/projects/aphrodisias/th.htm>>.

⁴⁰ Erim and Smith in Smith and Erim, (1991) 71.

⁴¹ Erim and Smith in Smith and Erim, (1991) 71.

⁴² Ratté and Smith, (2004) 172.

⁴³ Ratté and Smith, (2004) 173.

the theatre and the resetting of over twenty columns in the porticoes of the nearby *tetrastoon*, or piazza, located behind the stage of the theatre.⁴⁴

After the early seventh century CE, Aphrodisias was mostly deserted except for a church and a fortified village on site of the theatre.⁴⁵ The buttressed fortification wall was uncovered in the excavations in the northern theatre in 1974, at which time the precise function of the wall was unknown.⁴⁶ It blocks the back of the theatre stage and was originally thought to have been built by quarrying stone from the older buildings, including sections of the theatre.⁴⁷ However, it is now apparent that the wall consists of *spolia* harvested from approximately 1000 monumental tombs from the cemeteries surrounding the town rather than from the buildings within the city.⁴⁸

To conclude, the theatre at Aphrodisias is a site rich in archaeological material which provides an unusual wealth of information of great importance to the fields of history and art history.⁴⁹ In fact, Erim stated that no other recently found theatre has produced such a body of material which is so well connected chronologically.⁵⁰ The archive wall is especially useful for various periods in history, specifically Roman history in the third century CE, for which there is an unparalleled body of information, in addition to epigraphic evidence for other periods in history, mostly from the period of the Second Triumvirate and under the reign of Trajan. Moreover, there is a fair amount of statuary uncovered from within the theatre, and the theatre itself can reveal aspects of political history, such as the governor's seat for receiving people. The architecture found here also covers later periods in history, such as the Byzantine fortifications. Therefore, this site is very useful in revealing specific aspects of history from various periods from the first century BCE to the seventh century CE.

⁴⁴ Erim, (1983) 234.

⁴⁵ Ratté and Smith, (2004) 165.

⁴⁶ Erim, (1975) 17.

⁴⁷ Erim, (1983) 232.

⁴⁸ Yildirim and Gates, (2007) 138.

⁴⁹ Erim in Smith and Erim, (1991) 8.

⁵⁰ Erim in Smith and Erim, (1991) 8.

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