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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF THE ROMAN THEATRE AT SCUPI 2013-2015

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The archaeological site of Scupi is located 3.5 km from the city center of present-day Skopje. Scupi is one of the most important cities from the Roman period and one of the largest archaeological sites in the Republic of Macedonia. The formation of the city started around the beginning of the 1st century AD and received the status of a colony, i.e., *Colonia Flavia Scupinorum*, during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81–96 AD). As the largest ancient city in the territory of the Republic of Macedonia with an occupied area of 44 hectares and a Roman provincial city of the highest status, Scupi was one of the most important administrative, economic and cultural centres in this part of the Balkan Peninsula. This was the result of its outstanding location in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula, between major travel routes connecting the South with the North and the East with the West. It is considered to have been among the first urbanized cities in the very sense of the word, a centre of the province of Moesia Superior which became the capital of the province of Dardania during the reign of Diocletian (284–305 AD). Later, Scupi was established as an episcopal seat and an Archiepiscopy[1].

The theatre is positioned almost in the centre of the city and with its monumentality dominates over all of the other ancient buildings discovered on the archaeological site. With its grandiose dimensions of about 92.5 meters in diameter it represents so far the biggest ancient building found in the Republic of Macedonia.

The first archaeological excavations of the theatre were performed by N. Vulić between 1935 and 1937, when the main outline of the theatre was partially exposed[2]. Later, D. Rendić Miočević continued the excavations in 1959–1960 and revealed part of the scene building and parts of the auditorium substructure in several positions[3].

In 1998, the Skopje City Museum conducted revision excavations on parts of the

1 Lenče Jovanova, *Scupi = Colonia Flavia Scupinorum : guide Skopje*, (Skopje : Museum of the City of Skopje, 2008).; Lenče Jovanova, *Scupi : colonia flavia scupinorum*, (Skopje : Cultural Heritage Protection Office, 2015).; these two publications give a complete review on the history of the buildings seen through the prism of excavated ruins.

2 Никола Вулић, "Римско позориште код Скопља," у *Неколико питања из античке историје наше земље и римске старине* , (Београд : САНУ 1961), 3–23 [Посебна издања ; САНУ ; Одељење друштвених наука ; књ. 39].; NikolaVulić, "Rimsko pozorište kod Skoplja," u *Antički teatar na tlu Jugoslavije*, (Novi Sad : Matica srpska, 1981), 37–43.

3 Duje Rendić-Miočević, "Scupi - Istraživanje rimskog teatra 1959-1961 godine," u *Antički teatar na tlu Jugoslavije*, (Novi Sad : Matica srpska, 1981), 45–52.



Fig. 1 - The beginning of the 2013 campaign-the exterior fasade of the scaenae frons



Fig. 2 - Beginning of the 2014 campaign

scene building under the direction of L. Jovanova and Dj. Cajtler and in cooperation with the Natural-Historical Society from Nurnberg – Germany.

From that time on the site was left to the oblivion of time, completely covered with layers of erosion and vegetation. Then in 2013 began the project: "Ancient Theatre – Scupi, Research, Protection, Conservation, Restoration, Reconstruction and Presentation 2013-2017". The project is included in the capital investments of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, implemented by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia, and coordinated by the Cultural Heritage Protection Office. Stakeholders of the project are the Faculty of Philosophy-Skopje and the Skopje City Museum.

The goal of the project is complete excavation of the architectural elements of the theatre, and its conservation, reconstruction, revitalization and presentation to the general public. The ultimate goal is to revive its function for public use, as a contemporary cultural epicentre of numerous events such as theatrical shows, concerts, promotions, performances, etc.

Because of the size of the theatre and its surroundings, as well as the complexity of the task, the project is divided into several stages:

The first phase, which was implemented mostly in the period June–October 2013, encompassed all necessary preparatory activities to start the intensive and systematic archaeological excavations for the complete uncovering of the theatre, which was to be part of the following stages in 2014 and 2015. In this period, the first thing that was done was to remove the vegetation from the entire area of 10,000 m^2 above the theatre and its environment. After the full removal of the vegetation, erosion soil and the dumped soil from the previous excavation campaign, the next stage was to start non-invasive activities such as aero photography, geo-magnetic, geo-electric and geo-radar surveying of the site's surface of around 22,500 m^2, aimed at facilitating the next two phases of archaeological research.

The second phase, which took place during February-December 2014, was aimed at the systematic archaeological excavation of the whole area of the theatre and its immediate vicinity in part with an area of about 10,000 m^2. In this excavation the first stage was archaeological revision, including research of the scene building that was previously excavated



Fig. 3 - The discovery of the sole on-site theatre seats (many displaced)



Fig. 4 - 2014 Campaign: *the orcestra*

on two occasions when the main outlines of buildings were discovered: the *scaenae frons*, a central space (*postscaenium*), and part of the Eastern lateral wing (*basilica*). The excavations in this year were undertaken in order to confirm or revise existing knowledge in relation to the dimensions, constructive architectural elements, as well as the timeline and usage of divisional parts in the scene building.

The excavations confirmed some of the previously attained knowledge. The dimensions were determined more precisely, and new facts were uncovered, particularly in relation to the constructive elements. A complete technical and photographic documentation of the area was made, which constitutes the basis for the development of a basic project plan for conservation and restoration of the scene building. During the archaeological excavations in 2014, apart from defining the chronology of the theatre which existed from the first quarter of the 2nd century to the end of the 4th century, a large number of cultural deposits were found from 8-7th century BC until the 11th century AD.

The third phase, in accordance with the determined dynamics, started at the beginning of January 2015 and lasted without interruption to the end of December. In this last phase of the archaeological research of the theatre, the auditorium (*cavea*) and the orchestra were completely excavated. Within these excavations we discovered the fully preserved architecture of the auditorium and completed the stratigraphy of the construction area of the theatre. With this we fully completed this part of the project to the level from which the theatre was built and functioned, and we also completed the technical and photographic documentation which is the basis for the following two stages (fourth and fifth).

During 2015, the "Basic project for conservation and restoration of the scene building of the theatre in Scupi" was implemented and accepted. The fourth stage started in November 2015, and according to the planned pace, the conservation work on the scene building should be completed within a timeframe of six months.

Based on the results of the archaeological excavations, as well as on the complete photographic and technical documentation, the Conservation Centre of Skopje performed the existing and preliminary design for conservation, restoration, reconstruction and revitalization, as well as a presentation of the auditorium of the theatre in Scupi. According to the adopted



Fig. 5 - Beginning of the 2015 campaign

dynamics, it is planned that the fifth phase will be realized during 2016 and 2017, which will conclude the project "Ancient Theatre - Scupi, Research, Protection, Conservation, Presentation, Restoration and Reconstruction 2013-2017".

The Scupi theatre is the biggest antique building in the Republic of Macedonia. Its grandiose dimensions and architectural concept reflect in a unique way the cultural level of the citizens and the urbanism of *Colonia Flavia Scupinorum*. In the course of the excavations, most of the remains of the theatre were discovered, except for a part of the scene building which lies under the modern cemetery of the village of Zlokukjani. The theatre was built in one sequence, without subsequent intervention. According to the architectural concept, the building belongs to the western Roman type of theatre, with a semi-circular auditorium built on a natural slope and partially supported by complex walls. The scene building and the orchestra were placed in a levelled area, and the scene is connected with the auditorium through two arched corridors (*aditus maximi*). The *scaenae frons* had four porches with columns in three stories, and three entrances between the porches. Above the central entrance (*valva regia*), on the same level as the columns, there was a semi-circular niche, and above both side entrances (*hospitalia*) there were rectangular niches.

According to the existing elements it may be concluded that the performances took place in the orchestra. The theatre had a multifunctional character: beside theatrical plays it was also used as a venue for gladiatorial combat and fights with animals. This is suggested by the lack of a stage (*pulpitum*), the high orchestra podium, and the rectangular pit of 3.20 meters in length dug into the rock in the central part of the orchestra. The pit is connected with trenches that are parallel to the scene building. At the end of the usage of the theatre, the pit which was associated with the requirements of gladiator shows and fights with animals was filled with soil, and five stone blocks were laid on top. The blocks have a hole in the middle for the vertical positioning of wooden posts, which again is connected with these types of fights.

The date of construction, functioning and final closure of the theatre can be provided by combining the information from archaeological evidence, historical circumstances and written sources. A coin found in the mortar of one of the walls is a bronze AS of the emperor Caligula, minted between 37 and 41 AD, giving us a *post-quem* date for the construction. According to the architectural elements, namely architectural elements that adorned the scene



Fig. 6 - The 2015 campaign the Medieval settlment

building, the time of construction can be dated to the first quarter of the 2nd century[4]. This is further supported by historical data, i.e. the visit of the Roman emperor Hadrian to Scupi in the period between 121 and 125 AD. The final period of usage of the theatre is illustrated by numerous finds, especially a large number of coins, and also many deposits from the period when the theatre was out of use. According to written sources, Emperor Theodosius (*Flavius Theodosius)* visited Scupi on two occasions, in 379 and 388 AD, when he issued two edicts, called *Scupis* and *Scopis*. Knowing that Theodosius supported Christianity and persecuted all other religions, we presume that the end of the theatre occurred during this period, i.e. at the end of the 4th century.

In the area of the theatre, five later phases have been documented. Most likely, right after the theatre went out of use, the area was used as a burial site, as suggested by five graves dug in the bedrock, and two more cenotaphs dated to the early 5th century and possibly connected with the cult of the Martyrs.

The next phase is represented by Late Antique dwellings, confirmed by a large number of moveable finds and architectural remains dating from the end of the 5th century all the way to the beginning of the 7th century. Buildings from this period are found in multiple locations throughout the abandoned theatre area, and generally these are houses with one or more rooms. The houses are rustic, built of crude stone and bricks bound together with mud in the drywall technique. The houses had fireplaces, kilns and pits for the storage of food, and a large number of waste pits have been found.

Above the Late Antique houses there was early medieval strata found in the orchestra, dated to the 9th and 10th centuries according the finds. Except for numerous moveable archaeological finds, this layer includes several very rustic houses.

After the abandonment of the settlement, the area was used as a burial ground,

4 Виктор Лилчиќ, *Македонскиот камен за боговите, христијаните и за животот после животот*, том I (Скопје : Македонска Цивилизација, 2001). This publication focuses on the marble decorations which covered the façade of the scene building.



Fig. 7 - Third campaign, 2015: end of excavations

from which have been discovered more than 60 skeletons in graves. According to the finds in the graves they can be dated to the period of the 10th and 11th centuries. With this stratum ends the usage of the space above the theatre and its surroundings, where the oldest discoveries are two Iron Age graves dated to 8th–7th century BC.

During the excavations from 2013 to 2015, numerous archaeological material was found: over 10,000 artefacts made of ceramic, metal, bone and glass, as well as about 3,300 coins. In parallel with the excavations, this material was conserved and restored and is now ready for presentation.