

# SABRATHA

A guide to the studies and investigations  
of the past 50 years  
*dedicated to Nicola Bonacasa*



ROMA 2017

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*dedicated to Nicola Bonacasa*

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Fig. 92

## The Amphitheatre

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Undoubtedly one of the most significant monuments of the Tripolitanian *emporium*, the impressive ruins of the amphitheatre of Sabratha (Fig. 92), are located not far from the coast in the eastern outskirts of the ancient city, about 500 m to the east of the Temple of Isis (Pl. I.37). Its location was not casual: as all other amphitheatres, it was constructed outside the city centre for reasons of hygiene and public safety, and also to host large numbers of spectators from the nearby settlements. Its impressive dimensions make this an important landmark by making a statement of the presence of the city of Sabratha, and also in delimiting the division between the surrounding countryside and the built-up area.

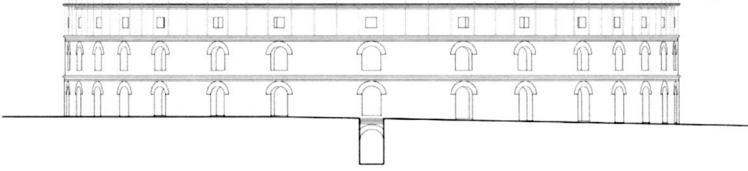
The amphitheatre can be reached on foot from the archaeological area following the coastline, or by car from the coastal road which runs along the perimeter of the site, leaving vehicles near the "Tomb of the Dead Hero" and approaching through one of the entrances

in the perimeter wall. The remains of the building – despoiled in ancient times – are still overwhelming for their sheer size and undeniable beauty. It is not difficult to imagine the cries of the impassioned and fervent crowds that witnessed the somewhat cruel and bloody performances of the *munera* (battles between gladiators) and the *venationes* (public spectacles with exotic and wild beasts).

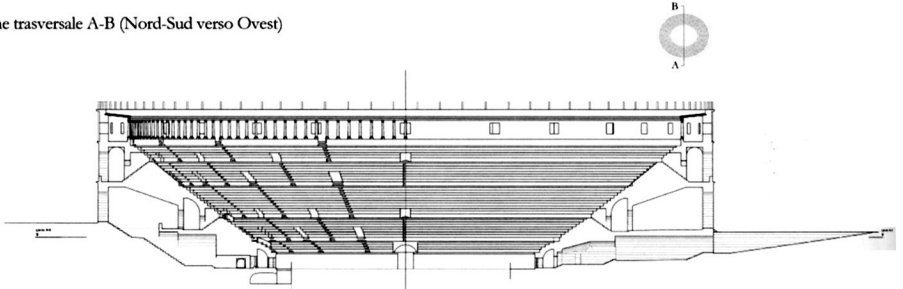
*History of the studies.* Almost entirely ignored by travellers and scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries (as for the rest of the city of Sabratha), the construction was first described by the Prince of Tuscany Luigi Salvatore d'Asburgo Lorena in his publication "*Yacht-reise in den Syrtten, 1873*", which also included an engraving.

Systematic excavations and its concomitant restoration began in 1924 under the guide of Renato Bartoccini and were interrupted in 1926. In little over two and a half years, the construction was almost entirely excavated and the rows of seats of the southern section were partially restored. These excavations required great resources; almost one

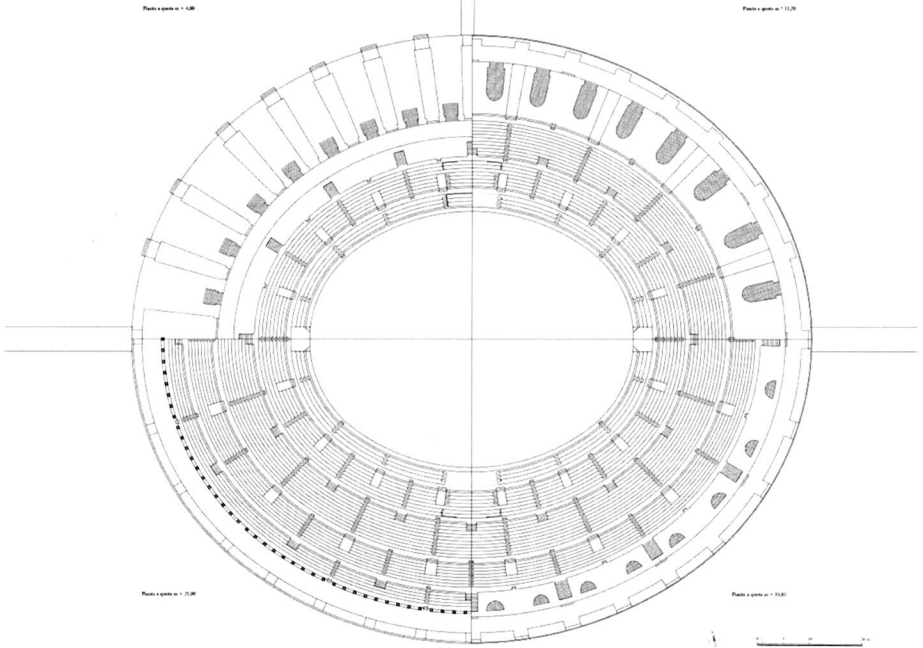
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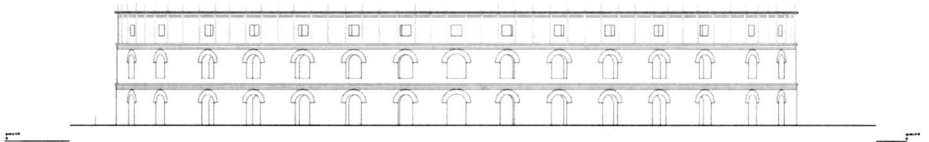


Fig. 93

hundred workers were involved (including some convicts) and many camels were used to pull the lightweight narrow-gauge *Decauville* wagons filled with sand and debris along the tracks towards the sea. In 1925 the amphitheatre received its first official visit by participants of the Congress of Tripoli, a group that included most of the eminent archaeologists of the period, and organised by the then Governor, Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata. In 1926 the site also received an official visit by Benito Mussolini. After these years of fervent activity, the monument fell into oblivion.

Some limited interventions were carried out in 1953 under the guidance of Vergara Caffarelli, and between the 1960s and 70s by Antonino Di Vita.

A campaign of studies and excavations (conducted by the author as part of doctoral studies in "Roman archaeology in the Maghreb and Cyrenaica" for the Centro di documentazione e ricerca sull'Archeologia dell'Africa Settentrionale "Antonino Di Vita" [Centre for the Documentation and Study of the Archaeology of North Africa] of the University of Macerata) was started in 2009 and concluded in 2012. These most recent studies included a new survey of the building, some new excavation trials, analysis of the construction technique and the architectural project of the amphitheatre, and also some hypotheses for its reconstruction.

*The monument.* This new survey (Fig. 93) was useful first and foremost in identifying the real dimensions of the construction: the amphitheatre measures 129.73 x 117.37 metres (for a total of approximately 12,000 sq.m) while the dimensions of the arena are 61.78 x 49.42 metres (for a total of 2,406 sq.m). The complex is aligned with the coast and most probably also with the main coastal thoroughfare that ran between Alexandria and Carthage.

The layout of the amphitheatre is based on an oval with four centres determined by a Pythagorean triangle (with sides in the ratio of 3:4:5), and modulated on the Punic cubit – the local unit of measure equivalent to 51.48 cm – and not on the Roman foot.

The entire construction is made of square ashlar stone, using calcarenite quarried *in situ*. Part of the amphitheatre is excavated in the underlying rock, and the arena and *podium* (the lower part of the cavea reserved for dignitaries) are below ground level.

The material excavated in its construction was immediately re-utilized in the construction of the external part of the cavea and the facade. The use of square-shaped blocks – a well-known Punic building technique, particularly in urban areas, – seems to confirm the use of local labour in the construction of the monument. Symbols and neo-Punic letters are visible on many of these stones, and are interpreted as mason's marks.

On the major axis are large accesses communicating between the internal and external areas: these were used for the entrance and exit of the "*pompa*", the grandiose parade that marked the start of the gladiatorial games. Along the two access corridors (previously covered with large vaults built in square masonry blocks and partially restored in a section of the west corridor) opened into eight rooms excavated in the bedrock. The doorways to these rooms have platband lintels (those in the east side have stepped *voussoirs*).

The floor of the arena is characterised by the presence of cruciform hypogea (Fig. 94A-B); along the walls of these rooms are traces of housings for beams supporting the wooden floor which once covered these areas. At the level of the arena, this wooden floor was covered with sand (from the Latin word *arena* meaning sand) which was an ideal support for wild animal hunts or for fights between gladiators, but also facilitated cleaning operations following these activities. These underground chambers were accessible via corridors to the south leading from the minor axis, and were also functional for the performances: through the use of hoists and inclined accesses, surprising and scenographic entrances to the arena could be made. The north corridor, again on the minor axis, gave access to a small room identifiable as a *spoliarium*, a place where the injured were treated and where



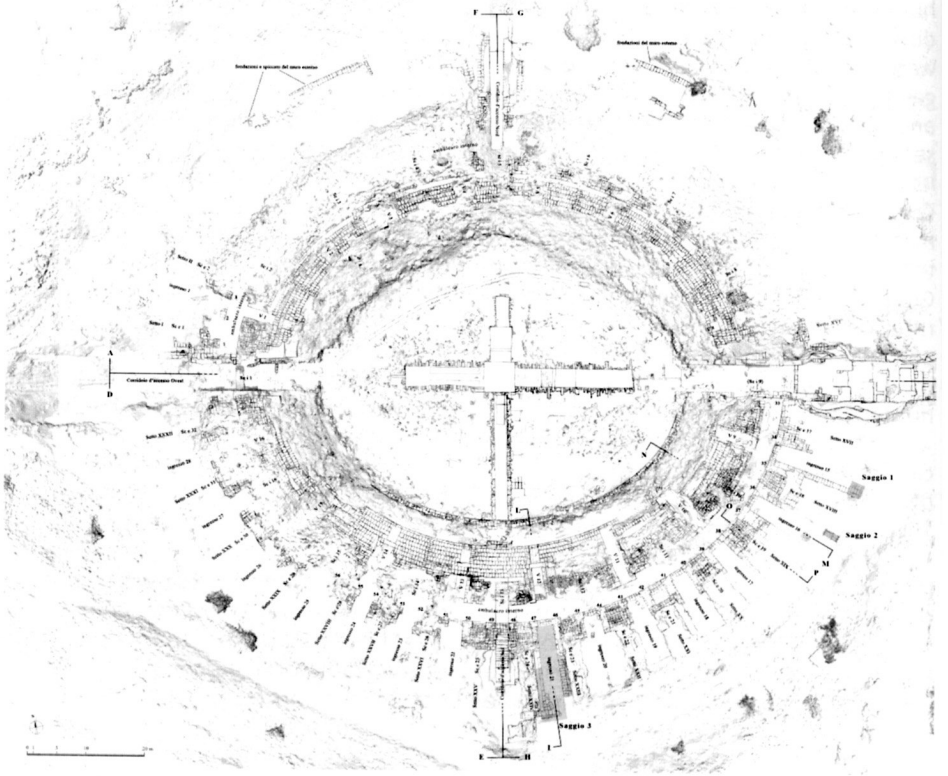


Fig. 94A



Fig. 94B



bodies of the fallen were recomposed.

The floor of the arena was surrounded by the high wall of the podium (originally 3.40 m high and today for the greater part in ruins), to which a net was added to safeguard the spectators. Ten smaller doors were also intercalated along the walls of the podium: four flanking the two main entrances (two on each side), two in correspondence with the lesser axis and four located approximately midway along the curves between the two axes. From these entrances, gladiators, animals and attendants could access the arena. Running along the rear of the podium wall was a vaulted corridor which supported above the seating structures of the podium where the city dignitaries were seated.

The cavea was divided into various sectors (*maeniana*) separated by corridors (*praecinctions*): above the level of the podium, the cavea was subdivided by three further *maeniana*: *ima*, *media* and *summa cavea* (Fig. 93). The *ima cavea* is particularly well-conserved (especially in the southern sector), and consists of 7 rows of seats and a foot rest, with 16 accesses for the public (*vomitoria*) and small staircases that facilitated both the circulation of the spectators and the division of the *maenianum* into vertical sectors (*cunei*). Traces of a balustrade in the central south *cuneo* of the *ima cavea* suggest that this was the location of the loggia for the dignitaries. Still visible is the *praecinatio* which separated the *ima* from the *media cavea*, which no longer exists: the entire upper and external parts of the cavea, including the facade, were completely despoiled.

The remains of the southern part, excavated in the 1920s gives an important insight into the functioning of the monument, the architecture of the facade, and the system for public access and distribution into the complex. Thirty-two imposing radial partition walls along the perimeter supported the external structure of the cavea with an equal number of entrances, 28 for the public distributed at regular intervals, and 4 in correspondence to the axes. Through these 28 entrances, the public could access a large corridor (inner ambulatory)

which constituted the main thoroughfare of the structure, and which in turn gave access the *praecinatio* between the podium and the *ima cavea* and by a series of steep staircases, the corridor between the *ima* and the *media cavea*. Alternatively, they could reach the upper sectors of the cavea through other staircases built inside the radial partition walls. This complex system for the circulation of the spectators is particularly evident in the southeast sector.

On the basis of the remains, one can imagine (Fig. 93) a rather solid wall which does not follow the canonical design of pillars and fornices framed by different orders (as seen in the Colosseum in Rome) but was characterised by a structure with a prevalence of mass on void: a continual wall with fornices for access located at fairly wide intervals from each other. The facade developed vertically with two levels of superposed fornices crowned by an attic wall. Some surviving masonry elements of the cornice show the presence of *corbels* or housings for a series of wooden struts (*mali*) of the awning or *velum* (two of these are found within the cruciform rooms of the arena), proof that also in Sabratha this system of large shades manoeuvred with riggings was used to protect the spectators from the heat of the African sun. The study of these cornices has shown that they bear marked similarity to analogous structural elements of the Theatre. The discovery of parts of the upper cornice refutes a previous suggestion that the amphitheatre was not completed in its entirety and is also evidence that the upper sections of the building were built in stone (and not in wood, as previously suggested).

This construction is the third largest still-existing amphitheatre in Africa Proconsularis, after Carthage and Thysdrus (el Jem). On the basis of the reconstruction, and using as a reference a standard width of 45 cm for each seat (*locus*), the structure could have seated a total of 16,000 spectators.

*Dating and life of the monument.*  
The lack of archaeological data and inscriptions regarding its construction

render it difficult to attribute a precise date to the structure. Nevertheless, a strong affinity to the local construction traditions, the use of the Punic cubit as a unit of measure, its typology, the relative simplicity of the hypogea, and the presence of mason's marks suggest a period analogous to the construction of the Theatre. Additionally, some historical considerations and epigraphic sources lead to indicate the late-Flavian period or the end of the 1st century AD. A monumental inscription regarding the dedication of a *quadriga* of Gaius Flavius Pudens (*IRT 117*), which can most probably be attributed to the Hadrianic period, commemorates a memorable edition of the gladiatorial games which lasted no less than five days.

Most likely the building remained in use until the end of the 4th century, and probably suffered damage in the earthquake of 365 AD. It appears to have been despoiled during the 6th century when most of its masonry structures were pillaged. There appear to be two main reasons for this: to source easily accessible material for construction, and also to avoid that the imposing construction could have been used as a stronghold by eventual invaders.

Evident signs of partial re-use of the surviving structures (walls and scaffold holes) are visible in the two large access corridors of the major axis, which were transformed into private housing in an unknown period.

Only a public body could have commissioned a large and costly monumental construction such as this amphitheatre. It is still to be understood why Sabratha, with a population estimated by Gilbert-Charles Picard to be around 15-20,000 persons, would have wanted a construction that could house 16,000 people, representing almost its entire population. A possible answer could be the role that this Tripolitanian *emporium* occupied as a stopping point on the shores of the Mediterranean for the caravans with their rich cargo of goods, including wild animals and slaves transported across the Sahara from the heart of Africa. The amphitheatre would not only have housed the inhabitants of the city but also a great number of travellers, merchants, couriers and other visitors that reached Sabratha for the great market that would have been held at periodical intervals, and which was the primary source of the city's wealth.

(G.M.)