

The Visiting of Septimius Severus to His Birthplace, an Approach to the Reliefs of Sabratha Theater

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Abstract: *This article discuss a visiting of Roman emperor Septimius Severus(193 – 211 A.D) to his birthplace Tripolitania region by an analysis study to the reliefs of the Sabratha Theater. So, the subjects of this reliefs is vary in regard of historical, legendary, symbolic, and other scenes from daily life. The author try to investigate the relationship between this visit and the reliefs most likely to adopt a political approach.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The design of the Sabratha Theater was a unique feature in Roman world especially in North Africa, yet few scholars have fully grasped its significance. The building of the Sabratha Theater has a maximum diameter of 92.60m and, with a capacity for 5000 spectators, is the largest Roman Theater in Africa ; with one of the most complex substructures, it merits admiration in those respects, but the building is equally well-known for its elaborately sculptured pulpitum, or stage front. For the theater's over 200 years of use, actors, orators, and dancers performed their art above a series of reliefs which weaved across the front of the pulpitum in a succession of projecting and receding bays.

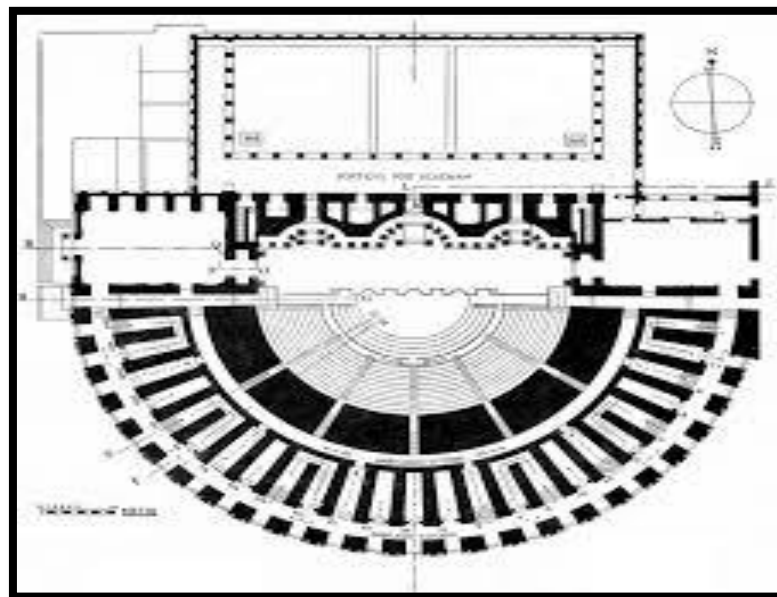


Fig1.

The Reliefs of Sabratha Theater (fig.1) were characterized by richness and diversity, and they demonstrate political dimensions as well. It is possible to emphasize the value of these reliefs and their connotations through conducting a comparative study of the reliefs of the facades with other contemporary Roman theaters .As such, we can attempt to have a good understanding of the importance of these reliefs and their significance in regard to both architectural position and subject.

The stage of this theater is decorated with marble high reliefs on the opposite side of the orchestra. Then, the stage is decorated with a marble edge which is seven niches (fig.2) within which various scenes are characterized by the diversity of their subjects and their artistic value. These scenes are also separated by various architectural and plant motifs. This proscenium has the best preserved reliefs of any of the theaters.



Fig2.

The seven niches, as three of them are in the form of exedra or semicircles, while the other four have a rectangular shape. They were distributed from left to right interchangeably (fig.3). So, the first niche came rectangular and was followed by a semicircle and so on. As such, the seventh niche was rectangular. This was very significant in two regards. The first is architectural as the merging of both straight and curved lines brought a sense of visual comfort. The second on the other hand is functional. By merging both the architectural coordination and the sculptures it was possible for the main niche to be circular and perfectly placed in the middle of the stage. This was an advantage that allowed the three panels of this niche to be seen by the audience in general and those in the orchestra in particular.



Fig3.

The sculptor surrounded the reliefs of the short pulpitum wall by two rectangular friezes; each of them ends by the pulpitum. The friezes are the connection between the stage and the orchestra. There are four steps by each frieze which are surrounded by two ionic columns. There are two dancers (fig.4) facing each other in motion situation depicted on each frieze. Notably, the first frieze on the left lost the top half of one of the dancers, while the dancer depicted on the second frieze to the right of the audience was completely lost.

The dancers wear a transparent sleeveless peplos (ὁ πέπλος), pinned by a brooch on the left shoulder, while revealing the right side of their chest as well as the legs. They also wear a mantle or a himation (ἱμάτιον) over the peplos. The wind is shown by the flying mantle ends behind their backs. The dancers hold a circular item that appears to be held by both hands from the right cornice - or one hand as it appears from the left cornice - it is probably a tambourine. Thus, the scene expresses two maenads, which are well-known in the Dionysian processions that are closely related to theatrical scenes.



Fig4.

The sculptor excelled in surrounding the reliefs with one single scene, which is the depiction of the two maenads. This has a nicesymmetry on the one hand, and provided a decorative aspect on the other. At the same time the scenes of the maenads a functional connection to the theater, as it is a follower of the theater God Dionysus.

2. DISCUSSION

The first niche:

This niche is rectangular, and the reliefs depicted a group of men, but much of it was lost (fig.5). However, the remaining part indicates a classroom. Caputo suggested that it was a classroom or an acting scene, while DiVita said that this scene maybe presenting a lesson of oratory. Raabe, on the other hand, considered that the scene represented a group of philosophers or poets.



Fig5.

Caputo mentioned that this niche consisted of six men divided into two groups; each group comprising three men, and the men are arranged as one standing followed by another sitting and so on. It seems that there is a group of five men on looking towards the left of the viewer(fig.6), where a majestic man sits facing the right in the position of meditation and listening, perhaps to those standing in front of him, while the man's handpoints towards himself (fig.6). The remains indicate that all men were wearing the chiton (χιτών) and hemation, and that the men were bearded. We can say that the general features of these figures remind us of Greek philosophers.

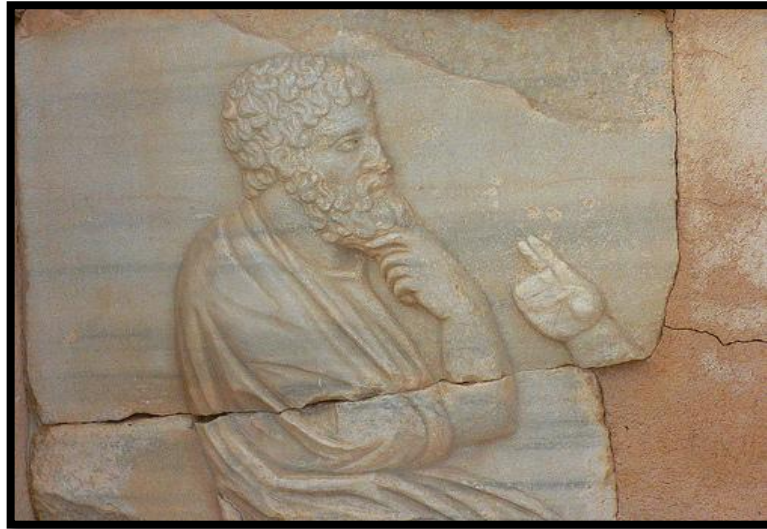


Fig6.

Caputo not only deduced the nature of the scene as a school or academy for acting or rhetoric through the prestige of characters, but rather based on the tools depicted on the eastern side of this niche are the sundial placed on an ionic column and some paper rolls placed on pedestals in facing the six men (fig.7).



Fig7.

It is more likely that the personality of the man sitting on a chair facing the five men is the teacher (fig.6), so he seems with big beard, and in meditation case as it appears from his deep look and the indication of his hand will be based on his beard, and also his distinguished position in relation to the group of men depicted, and through a method wearing his clothing, as he wraps the hemation and shows his right forearm under the cloak while his left arm disappears under the cloak, and this is the usual way of depicting the Greek philosophers, sages, teachers, and thinkers, and the Romans inherited from them .

The contemplator of the tools depicted in this educational scene (fig.7), which is represented by the sundial in the form of a circular disk with seven lines that emanate from a point at the top of the disk and falls on equal distances similar to the sun's rays , and placed this disk on a column with an Roman ionic capital, of course, where the decoration of the egg and arrow came to cover the space between the eyes of oculi, then another pedestal with the height of the sundial column carved above it twelve separators in two rows or two floors, and these joints are equal in number and size on each of the two floors; six separators in each, then another third pedestal of the same height carved four dividers on one floor.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that these instruments are closely related to each other, meaning that the sundial to measure time through sunlight and the base that holds twelve separators indicates the months of the year, while the pedestal with four separators refers to the four seasons of the year, then I think this is an educational astronomy scene, is not a lesson in acting as he saw Caputo who adopted in his opinion this perhaps by only sculpting this scene on the walls of the theater, as it is not a lesson in oratory as DiVita think ; maybe depended on the hand gesture of the man who speaks to the teacher that refersto the summit of discussion , or that the scene refers to a group of philosophers or poets in an ideal academy as vision of Raabe , perhaps based on the attribute of men, which are compared to the famous Plato academy mosaic through their beards and method of himation's wear. Butmy opinion that the tools had been proved the scene represents astronomy lesson o, so the relationship of these astronomical instruments, especially the sundial, with the nature of the work of the six men is so clear.

There is the remains of a long chiton showing two sandals in the distance between the first and second niches, forward from this relief there is a wheel standing on a rocky ground (fig.8) , the scene represents a woman most likely to be the goddess Nemesis , based on to the wheel, which is one of its attributes, as well as its relationship with theatrical works, and its close connection to the three goddesses, , Χαριτες or Charites, goddesses of beauty and charming, who depicted in the sixth niche of this theater as well.

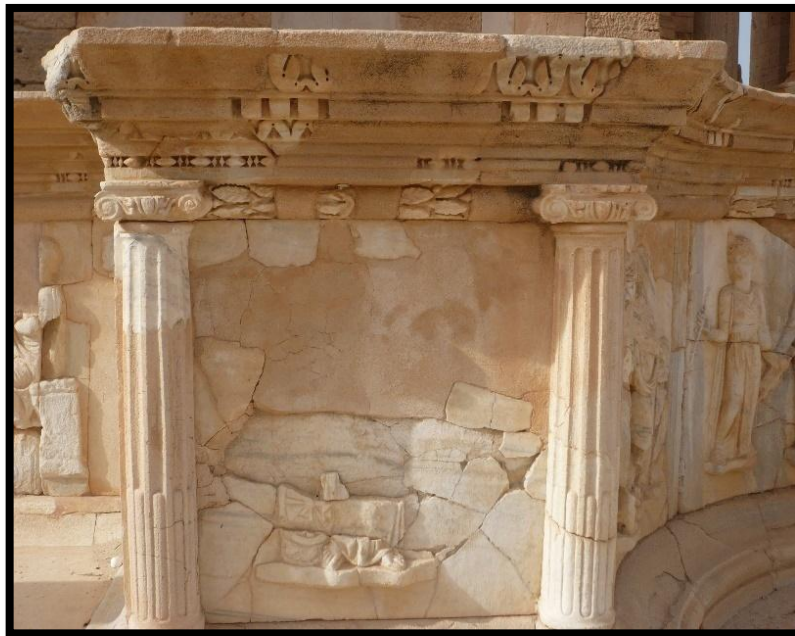


Fig8.

The second niche:-

This niche is semicircular, that is exedra, and it is the first apse of the three apses of this frieze (fig.9). In this exedra, the sculptures depict the muses" Μοῦσαι" goddesses of literature, science, and the arts ; Calliope" Καλλιόπη" goddess of epic poetry, Clio" Κλειώ" goddess of history, Euterpe" Εὐτέρπη" goddess of flutes and music, Thalia" Θάλεια" goddess of comedy, Melpomene"Μελπομένη" goddess of tragedy, Terpsichore" Τερψιχόρη" goddess of dance, Erato" Ἐρατώ" goddess of lyric poetry, Polyhymnia" Πολυὺμνία" goddess of sacred poetry, and Urania" Οὐρανία" goddess of astronomy; with their attributes ; where nine muses wearing transparent chiton and himation with one hairstyle, it is wrapped back and held from behind with a bouquet, as they seem to wear a wreath of flowers over their heads.



Fig9.

One of them to the left of the viewer is based on a ionic column and lost the attribute that was holding it, then a girl followed by the same features with her sundial placed on a column such as those depicted in the first niche, indicating she was Urania, the goddess of astronomy , then a girl turns towards the sundial and holds both hands with the aulos or flute; indicating she was Euterpe goddess of flutes and music, then a girl holds a comic mask; she was Thalia goddess of comedy, then followed by a girl is resting on a wooden support with the right hand while holding a Kythira; she was Erato goddess of lyric poetry, then a girl followed - lost her head now - held lyre over a pillar; maybe she was Terpsichore goddess of dance, then followed by a girl - she lost the head now also - and it seems that she was holding a papyrus, it is remarkable that this girl wraps the cloak while her right arm comes out from the folds, as seen by the teacher in the first niche, then I think that it's Calliope goddess of epic poetry .

The sculptor, maybe, intended to be adjacent to the educational scene as a Musesscene, as of protectors of thought, science and philosophy, as well as all sciences and arts. They accompany philosophers and Scientists in classical arts .

The reliefs were destroyed in the distance between the second and third niches, and only a foot remains and some edges of the himation, it was maybe a female figure .

The third niche:-

This niche is rectangular, or the second rectangular niche of four rectangular niches (fig.10), it depicted on the western side of which are a backrest chair, which is called the throne chair $\theta\rho\nu\nu\nu\sigma$ and there is a big box with a curved cover called the Kista $\kappa\iota\sigma\tau\eta$. Caputo mentioned that the chair was like chair used in the orchestra of the elite , while Raabe suggests that the chair is similar to the chair of Augustus on Gemma Augustea , and the box with the comparative study represents the type that Commonly used in Roman times and mostly for keeping clothes, Caputo - supported by Haynes - mentioned that the scene refers to the cult of one of Sabratha city, Liber Pater who simulated with Dionysus / Bacchus based on a throne chair and Kista.



Fig10.

There is no evidence for this conclusion, as this throne chair is not necessarily confined to the gods, heroes but rather used by the kings and elite on the one hand, and Caputo did not refute the association of the God Liber Pater or Dionysus / Bacchus with the Kista; perhaps according to the fact that the Kista was an essential element of funeral furniture in tombs in the Roman age, and therefore the Kista was associated with the God of the underworld Dionysus / Bacchus in the Roman age, but this study excludes the religious interpretation of the scene, and the scenes of the northern and eastern walls of this niche explain the reasons of sculptured each from the chair and the Kista on the western wall of this niche.



Fig11.

The reliefs on the northern wall of this niche (fig.11) are a woman sitting on the right of the viewer and in front of her two men standing, and they all are standing on podium that simulates the stage, as the sculptor depicted, behind the lady, a semi-closed door, and a closed door between the lady and the two men, the scene may represent a tragedy; the semi-closed door in Caputo's view is like the porta regia (or royal door) of scaenae frons while the completely closed door is the porta hospitalis (or left door) of scaenae frons, while DiVita, and Raabe both say that the closed door is the porta regia and the semi-closed door is the right door of scaenae frons.

The study agrees with the last opinion, as it seems logical to see the theatrical scene where the female character appears to be the central role in the scene, where she appears from her hand gesture to the two men that gives them a specific command, and then this lady is expected to mediate the stage, and the two side doors were apparently left semi-closed, perhaps for the entry of one of the actors, or for a major visitor as Raabe suggests, while the main door was completely closed.

Some of scholars tried to interpret this scene; some mentioned that the scene was arrested slave who is stealing and the lady orders her husband to reservation of him. The others explained the scene to a lady between her smart lover and her stupid husband.

It can be said that the scene represents a woman and her husband, by distinguishing in the clothes of both the woman and the man who stands at the end of the scene to the left of the viewer, while the man depicted between them with short chiton that resembles the servants' clothes, the woman wears the chiton and above him the hemation, as she appears as nobility features from her hairstyle and sitting on the chair, and the same thing appears on the man where the luxurious clothes and beard that refer to the prestige of the man or rather the husband. The study is consistent with the opinion that the servant is a thief, as he is punished by the husband, who apparently punches him. Anyway, the scene reflects an aspect of daily life, and the sculptor may have been represented the scenes of daily life, especially social life, and therefore the theater performs its awareness role for society and contributes to solving some of its social problems.



Fig12.

There is a table with three curved legs in the eastern wall of this niche (fig.12), whose sides take the shape of animal's feet, and the top of animal's heads too, and reach supports between their feet at the middle , and it appears that the illustrated animal is lioness , as the claws of a predatory animal appear at the ends, and the head is without a mane, then it's maybe a lioness, and the table has a rounded edge, and there are remnants of a raised rectangular table to put some things, or perhaps a seat without a back.

Caputo interpreted the table as the sacred stand, or Tripod, and the seat as the altar, which led him to interpret the scene as a religious scene, since the Tripod and the altar - in his opinion - symbolize to Apollo, and then the scene is completely separate from the scene of the theatrical work, which exposes some of society's problems. In fact, the table does not closely resemble the shape of Tripod, as well as the table with feet that take animal forms became common in Roman age in many scenes taken from daily life , and the platform is far from the forms of Greek and Roman altars, and the shape of the altar in the fourth niche may reinforces that.

Therefore, the study suggests that this niche reflects a pure topic of daily life which has been presented on stage, as the role of the theater to solve some of the problems of society. The sculptor expressed the event by surrounding the scene with household items, whether the chair and the box are

in the western wall, or the table and the platform are in the eastern wall of the niche. Maybe the Roman clothes which has been worn by both the husband and his wife - compared to the clothes of the servant - which denotes richness and which correspond to the furniture of the luxurious home, especially the throne chair, which was dedicated to the elite, it's indicates the correlation of the topic as one unit, and the tools in the scene were essential to understanding the details of the topic.

The reliefs in the distance between the third and the fourth niches was entirely, and it was maybe a mythelement compared to the remaining reliefs in the distances between the other niches.

The fourth niche:-

This niche is the second exedra or semicircular niche, and it's the most important exedra at all (fig.13), where this niche is given more space than its counterparts, as it mediates on the stage and on one straight line that divides the orchestra, cavea and pulpitum into two equal parts, It also mediates the seven niches: there are three niches on each side, as well as being in a straight line with both the main door or the porta regia in the wall of the scaenae frons on the one hand, and the middle door in the marble wall of the orchestra on the other hand, and the middle scalaria of the first floor of the cavea, in addition to the well at the edge of the orchestra is facing this niche.

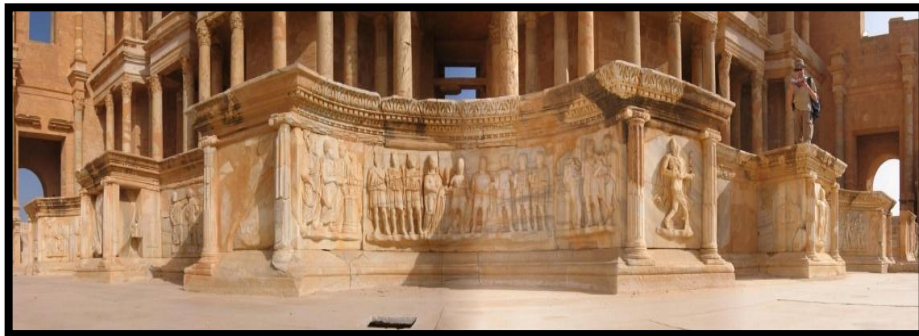


Fig13.

The reliefs in this niche has been divided into three separate continuous scenes (fig.14); there are separate in technique and position and are related to the unity of the subject. On the left of the viewer, three men are standing in front of the altar, next to which is a young priest who performs daily ritual service, or so-called Camillus, who extends his right hand with the oenochoe vase to pour in purification water, or maybe he spills wine drops, from the patera vase that the man in the middle holds, just as the young priest holds another vase of patera in his left hand.

Most studies interpreted the person who pouring of liquid on the altar, with the priest, who mediated the two men as Emperor Septimius Severus , and to his right an elderly man watching the event closely is his adopted son Plautinus and commander of the Pretorian Guards, while to his left is his son Caracalla , who appears to be a young adult compared to the commander of the Pretorian Guards who sculptured as old man comparable to Septimius himself.

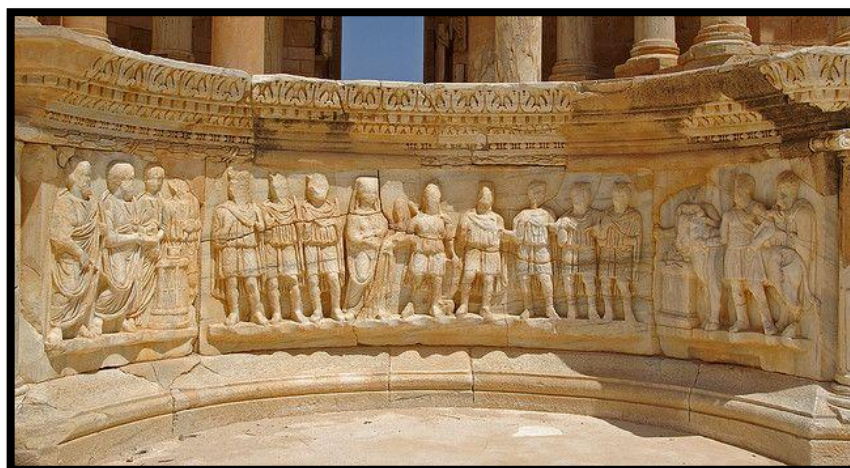


Fig14.

The study suggests that Septimius depicted in this scene as Serapis style(fig.15) , where the emperor's image is similar to that of Serapis, a Graeco-Egyptian deity, in terms of thick beard and thick head hair, and unfortunately the head has some fragmentation, therefore it is likely that curled strands drop on the forehead and partially cover the forehead, and the pupil eye facing upward, and the face is highly optimistic, as is the depiction of Serapis , and it can be compared with the Septimius model on the Argentine arch in Rome , as can be compared too with a portrait of him found in Ostia and preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston .

There are conflicting opinions about the beginning of the appearance of this style , but it is more likely that it appeared after the year 200 A.D, following the visit of Egypt in 199 -200 A.D, perhaps his visit to the Serapium, temple of Serapis in Memphis, at that time may have caused this style appearance. In addition to that this date is the beginning of a new phase in the Severan age, where Septimius became the absolute ruler undisputedly over the empire after he achieved a remarkable victory over his rivals at home and the Parthians abroad, and this style became very popular at that time, and it is considered the most common and widespread style for the emperor.



Fig15.

The style of Caracalla was portrayed in this niche, the study suggests that it is classified as Gabii style. where sculptured with a wide round face, large eyes, large protruding lips and a defined low forehead, with small tiles and short hair, while some strands of hair fall to the forehead, and this style can be compared to the reliefs of Caracalla on Atticus of the Leptis Magna arch, in the famous scene that combines him with Septimius and Geta, who represents family harmony, or *dextrarum iunctio* .

The second scene of this niche, which located exactly in the middle of the exedra (fig.16), where two women shook hands in the middle, surrounded by seven soldiers in military clothes, wearing helmets, armed with weapons, raised their right hands up, and their palms open up in a seemingly liturgical position or oath, all characters are depicted by frontality and standing position.

As for the interpretation of this scene, these two women refer to the personification of the cities of Rome and Sabratha. The woman standing on the right of the viewer wearing military clothes resembles the Amazons or rather the goddess Artemis / Diana; Where she wears the Chlamys and the Phrygian helmet and holds a bag of arrows on its back, and leans on the shield with the left hand and shook hands with the right hand, representing the city of Rome, while the other woman is depicted wearing the long Chiton and above him the himation and wearing the crown of forts similar to the Tyche goddess and carrying the Cornucopia with the left hand and shook hands Rome with the right hand, and in this scene she represents Tyche Sabratha or the personification of the city of Sabratha.

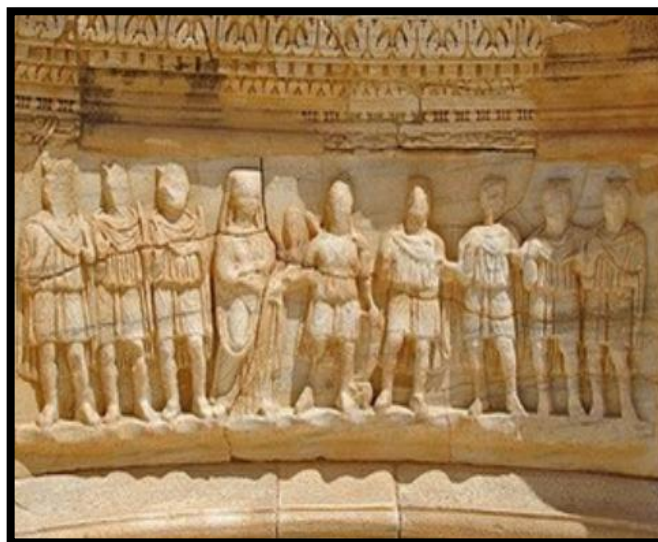


Fig16.

The sculptor has unparalleled success in magnifying the city of Rome, not only in its portrayal of force and domination through military clothing and war equipment, but also through its portrayal in the middle of the scene, and exactly in the middle of the niche, in a distinguished position that exceeds the position of the emperor himself, so that everyone can see her clearly in any place from the orchestra or stage, as well as depicting four soldiers on its left while only three on the left of Sabratha are depicted to emphasize the importance on the one hand and preserving the symmetry on the other hand.

Raabe indicated that the scene of the handshake between Rome and Sabratha in this niche is similar to the scene of the handshake between Septimius and Caracalla on the Atticus arch of Leptis Magna , which symbolizes family harmony, or *dextrarum iunctio*. The study does not support this comparison; as the scene symbolizes the loyalty of Sabratha city to Rome, not concordance between them. This can be inferred by depicting personification of Rome with the features of power and dominance, as it appears from military clothing and war equipment, and on the other hand, personification of Sabratha wears the crown of fortresses, and at the same time she carries the Cornucopia, perhaps the crown of fortresses indicates the strength of Sabratha city, and the durability of its walls, which achieves prosperity, therefore the sculptor depicts Sabratha carrying the Cornucopia. Therefore it can be said that the Sabratha city, with the durability of its walls and fortresses, and its loyalty to Rome through a handshake, achieves prosperity for it, of course, for Rome. What supports this interpretation is what is historically proven that it's followed an unprecedented defense system not only in Sabratha, but also in the Tripolitania region during the Severan age , which achieved economic boom that the region had not seen before, or after, in ancient ages.



Fig17.

The third and final scene in this niche located at the eastern end of the exedra to the right of the viewer (fig.17). It is essentially a continuation of the first scene or rather the completion of the rituals of purification and sacrifice. Two camilli - now large parts of their heads had been obliterated - that lead the bull towards the altar ,which loaded with some hard-to-identify fruits as well as bread and pine , and the pine might refer to the famous Dionysus / Bacchus thyrsus stick, and each holds the bull's leash, and carrying the slaughter tools, and the scene continues to follow a man behind the bull he wears hemation and depicts of a beard-like beard of Septimius in the first scene, perhaps the greatest priest, or Pontifex maximus, of the Sabratha city came to oversee the process of slaughter. It is worth noting that all the characters, in addition to the bull, were portrayed with frontality, and the sculptor didn't consider the anatomical proportions, especially between the sacrificers and the sacrifice.

It is worth noting that the sculptor depicted all types of offerings according to the Roman faith; in terms of pouring liquids, whether water or wine, as well as fruits offerings, in addition to animal offerings. It is thought that these offerings were presented to the God of the theater, Bacchus, where wine was, most likely, to be poured or fruits which associated such as pine or even animals like a bull, it is known that according to the ritual sacrifices of the Roman male deities were given to male animals, and the opposite is also true .

The study suggests that this main niche, which occupies a privileged position with regard to cavea, orchestra and stage, alike, so the sculptor employed this historical sculpture to political propaganda and promoting the idea of inheritance to his the eldest son Caracalla who participates in the event, with presence of the legitimacy of the army represented by the commander of the Praetorian Guards, the sculptor also intended at the same time to impose the prestige and dominance of the Roman Empire represented in Rome and the subjugation of Sabratha city with its soldiers, and it is the same thing that the sculptors of the Leptis Magna arch followed in the historical visit of Septimius to his hometown or birthplace.

The reliefs in the distance between the fourth and fifth niches, represents Hermes carries Dionysus as child with his right hand while holding a kerykeion" κερύκειον" stick (in Latin caduceus) with the left hand (fig.18), although he is running to the right of the viewer, he is depicting from his head by frontality, it is a general attribute of the most characters in reliefs of the Sabratha theater.



Fig18.

According to the legendary heritage, this scene can be understood that Hermes accelerates the task of delivering the child Dionysus to Nysa Mountain in the Caria region so that the nymphs of Nysa whose educate and care him far from his enemy Hera ; then it is related to education of Dionysus, who is the God of the theater and protector it, in addition to, some literary sources mentioned that Nysa Mountain was not only in Thrace, but many mountains were known in the ancient world bearing the

same name, the most important of which is Libya, and therefore this reliefs was a reflection to this literary sources, to express the home of education of Dionysus, which was probably in Libya.

The fifth niche:-

This niche is rectangular in shape and is the third niche of this type; which depicted two tragic masks on the western wall of the niche (fig.19), also two comic masks depicted on the eastern wall of the niche (fig.20), and on the northern wall of the niche is seemingly acting scene (fig.21), where two persons are standing facing each other, both of them wears a tragic mask, the person who stands to the right of the viewer, is wearing chiton, and himation, holding the club, and it appears that he is talking with the opposite person who depicted in the same clothes.



Fig19.



Fig20.

The scholars interpreted this scene; Caputo mentioned that the scene depicted Heracles / Hercules with his club talking with his son Hyllus, and suggests that the scene is inspired by the play "Women of Trachis" to Sophocles, while Bieber mentioned that the scene might express a dialogue between Theseus and Phaedra, Bieber believed that the person to the left of the viewer represented a woman and did not provide evidence for her interpretation, and the idea may have come from the age difference between the two persons, as the bearded person appears older than her.



Fig21.

The study suggests that the scene is firstly for two men; as there are no differences in clothing or anatomical feature of the nature of the body between them, perhaps representing a scene from the legendary legacy or other political or social themes as it is not the meaning of someone holding a club can establish evidence of being the hero Heracles.

The study excludes the interpretations of Caputo and Bieber, especially the person who is holding the club does not have the features of physical strength as depicting Heracles, and it is likely that the sculptor intended that the theater was providing various plays that combine tragic and comic, so the sculptor depicted the masks to signify this, and it is noted that the four masks has a variation in ages, this is the function of masks in determining the age and, at the same time expressing the human feelings.

It is worth noting that the clothes of the two persons in this niche are multi-folds, to resemble the canals of the Doric column, where each of them wears trousers under the chiton, it's may be a Syrian influence, and this can be compared to thereliefs discovered in the Temple of Belat Palmyra .

The reliefs in the distance between the fifth and sixth niches is a Heracles (fig. 22) who standing naked in a classical style based on the trunk of a tree on which the lion's skin was placed and at the same time resting the club on his left shoulder, while lifting his right hand upwards holding something up - Now it is disappeared - Raabe suggests that he was holding the golden apples of Hesperides , expressing the eleventh labor of his twelve labors.

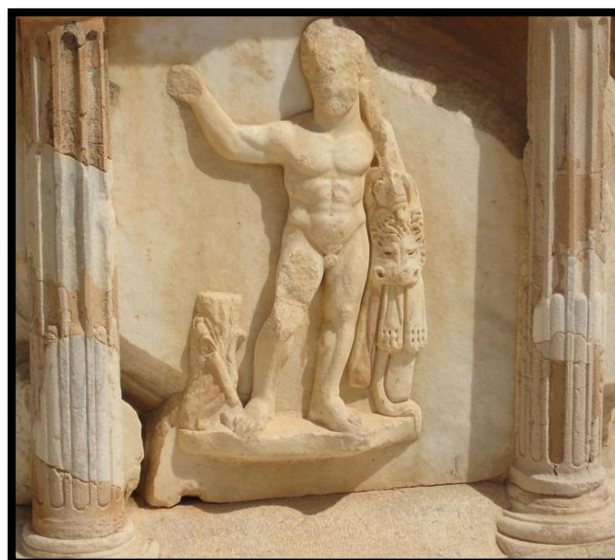


Fig22.

This style, although it is a relief, but it is very similar to the famous statue of Farnese Hercules in terms of nudity, body strength, and is based on the tree trunk lying on the skin of the lion and at the same time holding the club .But the style of Sabrathais different in terms of raising the right arm up It is very similar to Augustus statue Prima Porta, which embodies heroism and greatness, Which suggests that this relief is intended to glorify one of the protector deities of the Tripolitania region, and the study does not support Raape's vision of his embodiment of the eleventh labor.

The sixth niche:-

This niche is the third and final Exedra (fig.22) depicting the legend of the Judgment of Paris between the three goddesses Hera / Juno, Athena / Minerva, and Aphrodite / Venus, and the new here the appearance of the three goddesses of grace $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\tau\epsilon\varsigma$ or Charites, next to Aphrodite, so they are followers of her . The sculptor divided the scenes of the legend into three scenes, so the depiction of the main deities are in the middle and to the left of the scenes, the goddesses of the Charites, while depicted on the right of the viewer Paris and next to Hermes.



Fig23.

The Charites were depicting on the classical style (fig.24), as they depicted naked, intertwined with hands, forming a circular shape in a dancing position, so that two of them appear by frontality on both sides while the nymph appears in the middle in the back position except for the head depicted at the side, mostly she looks to the right or the left , in this scene shelooks to the right towards Aphrodite, as the nymph depicted on the left of the viewer holds a circular object with a long hand that is likely the mirror. It is worth noting that this style was commonly used in classical sculpture , and Roman mosaics, especially in the Mediterranean countries .

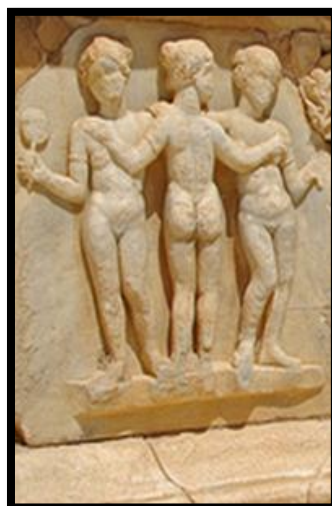


Fig24.

The three Olympic goddesses depicted exactly in the middle of the exedra (fig.25), where Hera / Juno stands to the right of the viewer - now lost the head – with frontality, *de face*, position, and hold the scepter and wear the long chiton and himation, while the goddess Athena / Minerva depicted as Ἀθηνᾶ Πρόμαχος Athena Promachos, where stands to the right is Hera with the three quarters position or *scorcio*, wears peplos, and himation, and leans on the shield with the left hand while holding the spear on the right hand and wears the Phrygian helmet. Aphrodite / Venus stands to the right of Athena naked and clings to the edges of the himation, which fly from above to drop behind her, and it seems that this is the result of her dancing movement; perhaps the sculptor depicted her as she exhibited her charms, and to emphasize this meaning the sculptor depicted Charites next to her, especially the literary sources mentioned that the Charites were accompanying Aphrodite permanently in processions and celebrations.



Fig25.

Paris depicted with Hermes on the far right of the viewer (fig.26) wearing *χλαμύς* Chlamys without sleeves, which were divided into three horizontal sections, and wore a short himation, and held a curved wand similar to the shepherd's wand, wearing the Phrygian helmet, and pointing to Hermes with his hand, who depicted naked, and held the short himation to drop behind, and he holds his Caduceus stick; there seems to be a conversation going on between them regarding the judgment of Paris, which Hermes declared in favor of Aphrodite.



Fig26.

It may come to mind why this legend is exclusively depicted in the theater. Some previous studies tried to find an answer to the reason for depicting this legend, the conclusion of their opinions are that

the scene expresses a part of a play that was shown on stage .This interpretation, in my opinion, contradicts the logic, because why, too, if we accept a controversy about the validity of their interpretation, this myth or play was chosen to be presented on the stage and depicted, without others, a fixed and permanent representation in this way.

It is worth noting the importance of this reliefs in this niche, because both the architect and sculptor were able to employ this sculpture in exedra on the one hand, and then selected this myth and depicted it on the other hand. The study considers that this exedra raises the importance of Aphrodite; this appears from the depiction of Charites next to her in a unique and distinctive depiction of this myth, perhaps the depiction of Charites dancing next to Aphrodite to express her victory, especially they only appeared with her during the celebrations, as literary sources has been mentioned .Therefore, the study suggests that reliefs of the judgment myth has a special and symbolic significance that has a close relationship with the trend of that age and has a close relationship as well with the representation of other niches.

The reliefs in the distance between the sixth and seventh niches, a large part of it was lost, but Caputo explained it by the Victoria goddess, because remains of the wings at the top of a lady.

The seventh niche:-

This niche is rectangular in shape (fig. 27) and it is the last niche. The reliefs was lost on the western and eastern sides of it, and only the reliefs is remaining on the northern side. A lady sitting on a chair (fig.28) depicted on the right of the viewer, who wearing long chiton and above him the himation, wearing a comic mask, and holding a long stick, her position is similar to the jury in sports competitions, looking at the left side of the viewer, where two young men appear to be wearing tragic mask, and fencing mode.



Fig27.



Fig28.

The previous studies suggests that the scene represents an play that combines comedy and tragedy, but the study deny this view because it is not possible through the form of masks to determine the type of literary work, but perhaps the sculptor intended to diversify the literary works that were presented on stage between social or legendary plays.

Then, the reliefs conclude with a depiction of one of the maenad in a dancing pose(fig.29) to achieve symmetry by surrounding the reliefs with sculpture of the maenads(figs.3,4) to emphasize the importance role of the theater master Dionysus and his followers, and the symmetry was achieved by sculpture of dolphins on both sides of the seven niches.



Fig29.

3. CONCLUSION

The Sabratha theater was distinguished by the edge of the stage in the face of the orchestra, with seven niches, some of which are rectangular and others are exedras (fig.3), and this is what characterized the theaters of Leptis of Magna, Timgad, Dougga, and Djémila, but the Sabratha theater was distinguished from all of them by a reliefs that expressed trends of that age, as it was characterized by its multiple topics, as well as vitality and expressive.

It is worth noting that just as the number of the theater niches is seven, the number of rays in the solar sundial in the first niche is also seven (fig.7), may be refer to *Ἀπόλλων*, Apollo, god of truth and prophecy, the sun and light, and who patron and protect the science and arts, so he born in the seventh month, his birthday took place on the seventh day of a month too at Delphi, at

Athens, in the cities of Peloponnesus, at Cyrene. And His lyre has

seven strings . So Apollo with the number seven point to

his connection with solar light. Moreover in the time of Augustus, who considered himself under the special protection of Apollo and was even said to be his son, his worship developed and he became one of the chief gods of Rome.

The number of soldiers in the central niche surrounding Rome and Sabratha is also seven (fig.16), and the number of the main persons who perform the purification and sacrifice operations (figs. 15, 17) is seven also. It is also noticed that the number of the gods in the sixth niche, which is the niche of depicting the legend of the Paris judgment (fig.23), is seven; four of the Olympic gods are Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Hermes, in addition to the Charites, who are three.



Fig30.

This repetition of number seven in the architectural and sculptural elements of Sabratha theater is interesting and it is already intended and did not come as a coincidence, especially the phenomenon itself was repeated once in the severan monuments in Leptis Magna, the most important of which is the Nymphaeum , where the phenomenon of the Seven niches is repeated in it, and the stones number of the apse, or arch, are also seven stones (fig.30), which attracts attention, especially the arches of other buildings from different Roman eras do not include seven number in any of its architectural elements, and perhaps one of the most famous public buildings is not in the Leptis Magna alone but in the Roman world is a public baths, or Thermae, from the Hadrian age, as it include several arches, and the seven stones, such as those found in the Severan buildings, were not noticed, and the Severan Basilica, in the city itself, found that the number of apses in each of its southeastern and northwestern ends is seven also(fig.31).

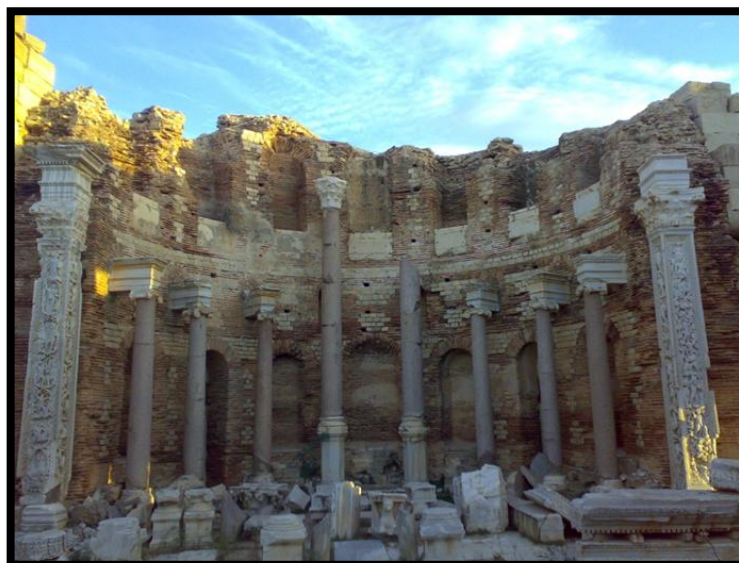


Fig31.

Therefore, the number 7 was sacred in the Severan age due to the association of this number with Mithraism, astronomy and astrology, and each of them was closely related to the other, and then it had a great reputation at that time. The Mithraism spread in the Severan age throughout the Roman Empire, especially among the ranks of the Roman army, and it is known the sanctity of the number seven in the Mithraism, as the followers of the Mithraism passes in seven stages each stage is protected by one of the gods of the seven planets, if he embrace Mithraism, may be a sign of the seven

planets that the soul crosses as it ascends . In the meantime Dio Cassius told us, Septimius Severus was a firm believer in all kinds of divination. When he ascended the throne of the Roman Empire, he wrote his autobiography in which he mentioned predictions and hopes that heralded his ascension to the throne. Literary sources also mentioned that he built the Septizodium, or "seven planetary house", a building dedicated to the seven planets, and archaeological evidences revealed his full and half statues with statues of the seven planets, thus espouses the close relationship between Septimius and the seven planets.

Septimius Severus has maximized the army's affair and supporting its staff, since historical events confirm the effective role of the army for him reaching the throne, so the army was the main guarantee in consolidating the rule for him and his dynasty after him.

So, Septimius Severus depicted himself with the main central niche(figs.14,15), inaugurating the theater with the ritual purification and slaughtering of rituals, perhaps during his historical visit to the region of Tripolitania, in 203 AD, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his rule. The Commander of the Praetorian Guard and seven soldiers were also depicting to denote the army and then it's Mithraism. The first and second niches (figs.7, 9) also expressed the spread of astronomy and astrology in society at that time.

Most previous studies have dated the theater building in the last quarter of the second century A.D., specifically the era of Commodus. While Sear dated it by the Severan era, without providing any evidence. All previous studies dated reliefs of the theater at the end of the Severan era , depending on attributes of the reliefs and its comparison with reliefs in the Severan era, especially on the Leptis Magnarch, and the Severan Basilica in the city itself; where the drill was used in depth to carve the hair of the head, which demonstrated the property of light and shade, a distinctive attribute of reliefs in the Severan era, as in the formulation of head hair for all the depicted persons, especially the teacher in the first niche, (fig.6) or the formulation of head hair for the emperor and his companions in the fourth niche (fig.15).

The sculptor has followed the two-dimensional style of all persons in the Sabratha's reliefs instead of using the three dimensions, or perspective, and this is evident in the scenes of the sacrifice (fig.17) and the emperor procession (fig.15), and this attribute continued to reliefs during the third and fourth centuries AD.

The Syrian influence appears in this reliefs; where it's depicting by frontality position regardless of the direction of the faces as it appears in the three exedrae (figs.9,14,23) which is a common attribute in reliefs of Septimiusarchat Leptis Magna , the sculptor also did not attempt to depict any backgrounds, and in general the reliefs expressed about the decorative style using stereotypical influences as in the scene of soldiers around Rome and Tyche Sabratha (fig.16), then probably the sculptors of Aphrodisias who sculpt these reliefs , as the same technique was in Severan sculptures at Leptis Magna.

Thus, the previous studies concluded that the theater of Sabratha was built in the age of Antonines (138 – 180 A.D),or in the last quarter of the second century, while the reliefs were added to it in the Severan age (193 – 235 A.D). The study does not support this vision at all and emphasizes the integrative unity of the theater and the architectural and reliefs harmony of it, so suggest that dating of the theater is the era of Septimius Severus, probably 203 AD, on the occasion of the historical visit of the Emperor to the region, and perhaps the theater was building in the new neighborhood of the city, on the ruins of the old theater.

Since art is mirror of the society and literature is its voice, this meaning was proving in reliefs of the Sabratha theater; the first niche (figs.5 - 7) and the second niche (fig.9) reflected the knowledge of astronomy and astrology during the Severan era, as the third niche (figs.10 - 12),the fifth (figs. 19 - 21) and the seventh niche (figs.27 - 28) showed a model of a social issues that appears to be treat on the stage. The religious and mythological issues of a certain meaning were presented on the stage that may have been re-employed as shown by the sixth niche (figs.23 - 26), Thus the educational and cultural functions of the theater multiplied and its active role in the society.

The fourth niche (figs. 13 - 17) reflected a historical event, therefore the emperor was depicted by its inauguration and the ritual of purification and slaughtering. Theniche itself reflected the political

reality at that time, represented in the loyalty of Sabratha city to Rome - the mother city - and then to the Roman Empire; which achieved the prosperity to Sabratha. The niche was also used as a media tool to reflect the political reality, the sculptor chose the location of the niche and the location of the loyalty scene, so that all audiences can see it clearly.

Maybe also the sculpture of maenads (figs.4,29), which encircled there liefs, reflected the entertainment role of the theater at that time, then the study emphasizes the importance of the theater role in society, and it's multiple functions; religious, educational, cultural, media, and entertainment.

The study considers that the architectural and sculptural harmony of Sabratha theater was manifesting through three Exedrae (figs.9,13 - 17,23 - 26) that depicted religious and historical subjects, but rectangular niches were depicting (figs.5 - 7,10 - 12,19 - 21,27 - 28) daily life themes, that express about trends of that age, harmony was also achieved between the depicted variety subjects, which reflected the culture of society in all its classes.

The sculpture of Nemesis (fig.8), who was the goddess of divine retribution and revenge, it's perhaps referred to principles of the Mithraism, which calls for justice and equality between humans and then the achievement of the happiness, which is the main task of Nemesis, according to the literary sources.

The sculptures of both Bacchus and Hercules in consecutive two friezes (figs.18,22) may indicate their symbolism for both Geta and Caracalla, sons of Septimius, as they depicted and behind them the two Gods on Atticus of Leptis Magna arch , and both Bacchus and Hercules are the protector deities of the Severan dynasty , As for the sculpture of the goddess Victoria, it symbolizes the emperor's victory in his multiple wars, and it can be compared to the distinguished relief of Victoria on Leptis Magna arch.

The study suggests that the sculptor has been selected the judgment of Paris myth (figs.23 - 26), maybe to raise the status of Aphrodite/ Venus and in the meanwhile maximize the rank of Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla, his successor to the throne ; as Venus was the protector goddess of one of the seven planets named "Venus" , and at the same time, she was protecting April month in ancient Roman calendar , which was the month of the birth of Emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla; where Septimius was born on the eleventh of April of the year 145 AD at Leptis Magna , and Caracalla was born on the fourth of April of the year 188 AD in Lyon.

This interpretation may be consistent with reliefs of the first niche (figs.5 - 7), which the study suggested that a school of astronomy and astrology, as well as the depiction of Muses in the second niche (fig.9) and its patronage of all sciences and arts, especially astronomy and astrology. Therefore, the depicting of Venus is consistent with that of Septimius and his son Caracalla in the fourth niche (figs.13 - 17), who they only were depicting from Severan dynasty, while Geta and Julia Domina were depicting with them on the Leptis Magna arch.

Perhaps, the importance of Venus in astronomy, the sculptor has been depicted a complete niche for her (fig.23), to indicate her victory with the golden apple with Charites, perhaps in celebration of this victory. Two dolphins have been sculptured in the orchestra too (figs.2, 3, 29), there is a close relationship between Venus and Dolphin in the classical concept, where the dolphin represented the marine environment, which the goddess originated.

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