

A first comprehensive study of the Wadi Sabra theater was conducted in 2018 by a team representing Université Libre of Brussels (ULB, Belgium). Sabra, located in a narrow valley ca. 6.5 km south of Petra, was a small suburban settlement that developed during the Nabataean and Roman periods in close association with Petra (Tholbecq et al. 2016). The rock-cut theater, discovered in 1828, is a vital infrastructural component of the settlement, which also included a sanctuary with a large (ca. 50 x 70 m) precinct, two temples, and a bath complex. The theater is located across the wadi from the remains of dwellings that developed north of the “Acropolis” fortified during the late Roman period.

The location of the theater utilizes the local topography well; the builders took advantage of a wide natural gully formed by the outlet of a small tributary valley. Even after the carving of the theater’s *cavea*, runoff water continued to flow into this tributary gorge. Thus, an elaborate water management system was introduced, including successive retaining basins that were explored by M. Lindner some time ago, as well as water channels located under the seats and in the walkways (*praecinctions*) of the *cavea*. These channels led to a newly excavated settling basin from which the water was conveyed to the other bank of the wadi via an aqueduct (Fig. 1). Furthermore, it was also established that the large cistern visible above the *cavea* was actually built only after the abandonment of the theater as a public building.

With the *cavea* being ca. 36 m in diameter and the *orchestra* ca. 22 m in diameter, this slightly horseshoe-shaped theater is rather small. From a horizontal perspective, the *cavea* has a tiered seating area (i.e., a single *maenianum*), which is limited at the top and at the bottom by ca. 1 m wide *praecinctions*. The *orchestra*’s rock floor is about 3.6 m below the level of the lower *praecinctio*. Ten tiers of seats are preserved in the southwestern sector of the monument, forming two *cunei* (wedges) on either side of a 0.72 m wide staircase (*scala*). The lower nine tiers carry benches, ca. 0.45 m high and 0.54 m deep each, while the tenth (uppermost) tier has monolithic seats with backsides. The location of six radial *scalae*, particularly at both ends and in the side parts of the *cavea*, can be traced through the examination of extant remains.

Eight soundings were opened in the theater. At this point of investigation, it is not known if the theater ever had a stage building (*scaena*). However, it is apparent that in the course of the 2nd century AD, several important components of the overall design were constructed. These include monumental access to the *cavea* by means of a stairway starting by the wadi bed level, a large curved wall that separated the wadi from the *orchestra*, a corridor leading to the latter, and

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the piers of the aforementioned aqueduct. During the 3rd century, the building suffered a destruction after which important structural and functional changes were implemented. The *orchestra* appears to have been completely closed, the corridor became filled up with dumps datable to the 3rd and 4th centuries, and the high parts of the theater's perimeter wall were rebuilt using seats from the *cavea*. Presumably, these changes made it necessary to open another access to the *orchestra*, effected by a flight of steps leading from the lower *praecinctio* of the *cavea* down to the level of the *orchestra*. This new circulation access was located close to the central axis of the theater. A final major destruction, sometime in the 4th century or later, sealed the history of the theater in Sabra.

Reference

Tholbecq, L., T. Fournet, N. Paridaens, S. Delcros, and C. Durand. 2016. "Sabrah, a Satellite Hamlet of Petra, Jordan." *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 46: 277-97.