

REVISITING THE TOMIS AMPHITHEATRE – THEORIES AND HYPOTHESIS*

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Cuvinete cheie: *amfiteatre, gladiatori, Moesia Inferior, Pont-Euxin, Tomis*

Mots clefs : *amphithéâtres, gladiateurs, Moesia-Inférieure, Pont-Euxin, Tomis.*

Rezumat: *Ipotezele referitoare la existența unui amfiteatru la Tomis nu încetează să nască polemici. Cea mai răspândită opinie este aceea că luptele de gladiatori ar fi avut loc într-un teatru sau într-un stadion, edificii care ar fi suferit modificări pentru a permite logistica susținerii unor astfel de evenimente. Rezervele exprimate în legătură cu existența unui edificiu roman prin excelență, construit într-o metropolă de tradiție grecească, au pierdut teren odată cu descoperirea în anul 1980 a unei structuri ce prezenta caracteristicile unui amfiteatru. Prezentul studiu își propune să abordeze încă o dată problematica legată de prezența acestui amfiteatru și trece în revistă posibilele analogii dintre edificiile deja cunoscute, pentru a înțelege cât mai bine rolul atribuit celui din metropola pontului în contextul istoriei provinciilor de la Marea Neagră.*

Résumé : *Les hypothèses entourant l'existence d'un amphithéâtre à Tomis n'ont cessé de différer. Celle communément acceptée défend la tenue des combats de gladiateurs dans un théâtre ou un stade modifié afin de les accueillir. Les réserves exprimées autour de l'existence d'un édifice spécifique, romain par excellence, dans une ville grecque ont perduré même après la découverte dans les années 1980 d'un bâtiment présentant certaines caractéristiques propres à un amphithéâtre. Le présent article se propose dès lors d'aborder à nouveau cette question en passant en revue les différentes catégories de bâtiments concernés avant de cerner le rôle joué par l'amphithéâtre de Tomis dans l'histoire des provinces de la mer Noire.*

In the beginning, gladiator combats took place in the Forum, *Campus Martius*,

* This article has received financial support through the "Routes of academic excellence in doctoral and post-doctoral research-READ, contract no. HRD / 159 / 1.5 / S / 137,926, financed from the European Social Fund through the Sectoral and Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013".

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as well as other open spaces¹. Pliny the Elder claims that G. Scribonius Curio built the first amphitheater in 52 B.C. to host the funerary games in honor of his father. As the name suggests (*ἀμφί*, both sides, *θέατρον*, theater), the edifice is just that, a new building created by mirroring two theaters, meant for *ludi scaenici*. The two theaters were placed on pivots in order to facilitate moving them, thus they could have been turned or placed back to back or front to front, depending on whether they were hosting *munera*² or not. Initially, the amphitheater was build out of wood³, but because of the small number of spectators it could accommodate and the rising interest and popularity of gladiators, the edifice was further improved and developed using the best materials available and the most ingenious construction techniques, making it a complex, new and unmistakable piece of Roman architecture. It is certain that the moment Pliny refers to does not stand at the origin of amphitheaters, since this type of edifices were already known in Campania for more than a generation⁴.

The expansion of the Roman civilization facilitated the spread of *munera* and *venationes*, as well as the construction of amphitheaters, which ended up representing the Roman culture⁵. The building program intensifies in the 2nd century A.D. when we can find amphitheaters all over the Roman Empire⁶ in most of the major cities⁷. Thus, we can find such examples in the cities of Moesia Inferior, like Marcianopolis. The amphitheater here measures 70 (66) x 60 (65) m at the exterior, while the arena measures 46 (47) x 40 m, dimensions which place it in the small size arenas category⁸.

In 1989, during the construction of a new hotel in Tomis, today Hotel Ibis in the area of Mircea cel Bătrân, Ecaterina Varga, Negru Vodă and Dragoș Vodă streets, the wall of a vast building was exposed, at about 7 meters depth⁹. The building technique was *opus mixtum* and enclosed a plane, ellipsoidal shaped area, oriented North to South and measuring 55 x 60 m and 30 x 35 m¹⁰. The discovery entitles the coordinator of the excavation to suggest that it might be an arena¹¹. Moreover, he adds that the wall was doubled towards the exterior by other parallel walls following the same direction and forming a large corridor of 1.20 – 1.35 m¹². This wall was part of the *cavea* and it might have been the *podium*, usually found at the edge of the arena and designed for the important people

¹ WIEDEMANN 2002, p. 5; TESSIER &, LOPEZ 2006, p. 14, NOSSOV 2009, p. 112.

² Plinius, Hist.Nat. XXXVI, 117-120; VILLE 1981, p. 67; BOMGARDNER 2000, p. 36-37; NOSSOV 2009, p. 111-112.

³ BOMGARDNER 2000, p. 37.

⁴ GOLVIN & LANDES 1990, p. 39; BOMGARDNER 2000, p. 37.

⁵ GOLVIN & LANDES 1990, p. 85; BOULEY 1994, p. 30.

⁶ NASSOV 2009, p. 113.

⁷ GOLVIN & LANDES 1990, p. 85; BOMGARDNER 2000, p. 61.

⁸ GEROV 1980, p. 292-293; GOLVIN 1988, p. 139; BOULEY 1999, p. 188; VAGALINSKI 2002, p. 279; BOTTEZ 2009, p. 251, anex 88.

⁹ RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35.

¹⁰ RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35

¹¹ RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35.

¹² RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35: „A l'extérieur, ces tronçons sont doublés d'autres murs maçonnés pareillement et poursuivant le même tracé arqué fermant un couloir large de 1,2-1,35 m.”.

attending the games, like ambassadors, high-ranking officials, members of the elite, etc.¹³.

All of this information, corroborated with the discovery of benches around the edifice, strongly suggests that we are indeed dealing with an amphitheater. It is worth mentioning that the most interesting bench discovered, though fragmentary, still preserved the stylized representation of an animal foot on one side and the remains of an inscription that only preserved the letters EXPY¹⁴.

Epigraphic materials discovered here also attest the existence of a building for hosting gladiator combats at Tomis. The first is an inscription mentioning the anonymous pontarch of Neapolis, in Samaria¹⁵. The second inscription is the tombstone of a *provocator* gladiator named Agroicos¹⁶ and the third is another tombstone, this time of a beast fighter named Attalos¹⁷. All three inscriptions use the term of *stadium*, which can also refer to the two other places that held combats, the amphitheater and theater¹⁸.

Why should we consider the edifice discovered in 1989 as an amphitheater and the term used in the three inscriptions as related to it? First, from our point of view, the edifice in Tomis cannot be a stadium because it simply does not measure the required dimensions. For comparison, we can use the stadium discovered at Philippopolis, measuring 250 m in length and 70 m in width and a course 222 -240 m long and 25-35 m wide. Its estimated capacity is of 25.000 to 30.000 spectators, making it clear that the dimensions of the Tomis edifice are much too reduced for us to suppose we are dealing with a *stadium*¹⁹.

Another element that contradicts the stadium hypothesis is the shape of the course. The *stadia*, as the one in Philippopolis, have one straight end, while the other is shaped as an U²⁰. This detail does not agree with the description of the Tomis edifice where we are dealing with a clear ellipsoidal arena, oriented N-S²¹.

It is certain that stadiums were also used for gladiator combats, the most famous example being the Aphrodisias *stadium*, which measures similar dimensions as the Philippopolis one, 270 x 59 m at the exterior and 238 x 40 m the arena, and accommodated around 30.000 people²². A 1.6 m tall podium, a square refuge spot²³ and a stone flange on the eastern part of the stadium shaped as an U, thus forming an arena attest the fact that gladiator combats were held here²⁴.

Moreover, the same can be said about calling the Tomis edifice a theater. The fact that the arena was partially excavated, along with the vagueness of the

¹³ BOMGARDNER 2000, p. 12.

¹⁴ RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35.

¹⁵ STOIAN 1962, p. 162-163.

¹⁶ STOIAN 1962, 199.

¹⁷ STOIAN 1962, p. 200.

¹⁸ STOIAN 1962, p. 163.

¹⁹ BOULEY 1999, p. 143; TOPALIVOV 2012, p. 403.

²⁰ WELCH 1998, p. 548; TOPALIVOV 2012, p. 404.

²¹ RĂDULESCU 1991, p. 35.

²² WELCH 1998, p. 542.

²³ WELCH 1998, p. 558-559.

²⁴ WELCH 1998, p. 565, fig. 13.

information retrieved, led some researchers to suggest this hypothesis. In a theater, the orchestra is separated from the *cavea* by a line of rectangular stone blocks forming a flange ranging in thickness from 1,2 to 2 meters. This belt is a common improvement brought to theaters holding gladiator combats, as it is placed vertically to the *cavea* in order to protect the first rows of benches²⁵. Regarding the Tomis edifice, no proof of such protection method has been found; as the discoveries consist solely of walls. Furthermore, the orchestra in a theater is circular or semi-circular, not elliptic as in our case. The *orchestrae* modified for gladiator combats never measure more than 28 m, like the one of the Philippopolis theatre that could accommodate around 3.500 people²⁶.

Taking into account the arguments presented so far, we can only conclude that the Tomis discovery must be part of an amphitheater, specific for the arena, which has always been designed in the shape of an ellipse²⁷. The arena's dimensions puts the edifice in the mid – sized category of amphitheaters, as the one discovered in Serdica. This arena measures 60 x 40 m²⁸, while the entire edifice measures close to 100 x 80 m and is 20 – 25 m tall, with a capacity of 20.000 spectators²⁹.

The Tomis arena was situated *extra muros* during its entire period of use, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries³⁰. Unfortunately, no other information about this edifice is available as there has been no publication, making it very difficult to determine clearer elements of its capacity, architecture, etc. Even though one cannot make assumptions on the architecture, the capacity can be estimated by means of analogies. Given the fact that the dimensions are similar to the Serdica amphitheater, one can easily assume that the Tomis amphitheater could have accommodated around the same number of spectators, 20.000. This estimation may seem overreaching, but why shouldn't the largest city on the left shore of the Black Sea, the *κοινόν*³¹, have had a large multi-functional construction³² such as this? So far, the theories about the number of people in the city agree on a number of 20 – 30.000 inhabitants³³, but there is no clear evidence to support this estimation or any other. If we are to consider the importance of Tomis as a metropolis, the 40.000 inhabitants assumptions are not too exaggerated, especially given the flourishing of the city in the 2nd and 3rd centuries due to the economic relations expansion that also attracted immigrants from other areas of the empire³⁴. Moreover, the amphitheater would not have served only the pleasure of the inhabitants of the city, but also those from the territory and from neighboring cities.

²⁵ BOULEY 1999, p. 159-169.

²⁶ BOULEY 1999, p. 162; KESSIAKOVA 1999, p. 122; VAGALINSKI 2002, p. 282; TOPALIVOV 2012, p. 392.

²⁷ GOLVIN 1988, p. 298-300.

²⁸ KIROVA 2012, p. 234.

²⁹ PAUNOV 2007, p. 40; KIROVA 2012, p. 234.

³⁰ PAPUC 2005, p. 51.

³¹ ISM II 97; BUZOIANU & BĂRBULESCU 2012, p. 42-43.

³² GOLVIN 1988, p. 300.

³³ SUCEVEANU 77, p. 49.

³⁴ BUZOIANU & BĂRBULESCU 2008, p. 30.

The Tomis amphitheater, a city of Greek tradition, is unique in the Black Sea area, but its existence can be explained. Most certainly, as in the Aphrodisias' case, where there is a hybrid construction between an amphitheater and a stadium, building such an edifice stood as a symbol of Roman authority³⁵ and leads us to think that building one in Tomis was a statement of the city's acceptance of Roman culture or a means by which the Romans imposed it³⁶.

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³⁵ BOULEY 1994, p. 30.

³⁶ WELCH 1998, p. 563-564.

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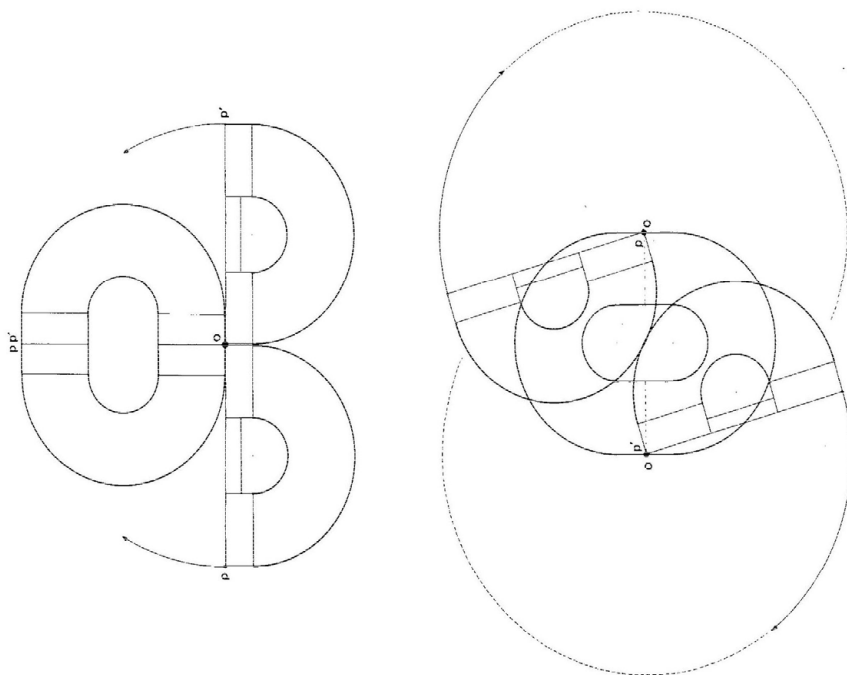


Fig. 1 – Two hypothetical reconstructions of the double temple erected by Scribonius Curio. (Source: Golvin 1988, pl.IV)

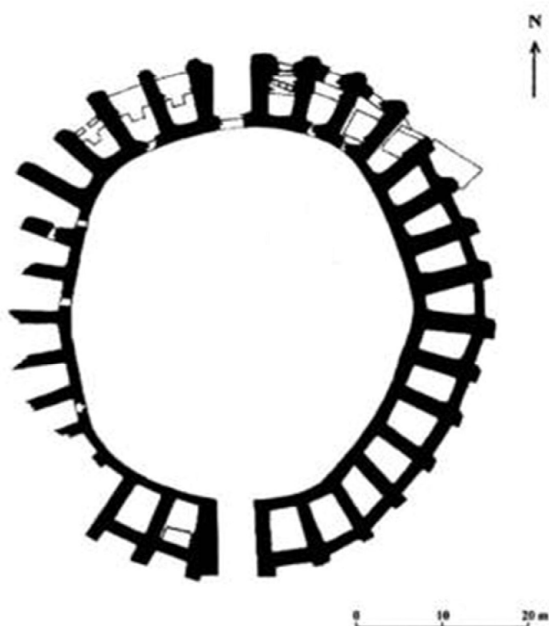


Fig. 2 – The Marcianopolis amphitheatre plan. (Source: Vagalinski 2002, 549, fig.2)

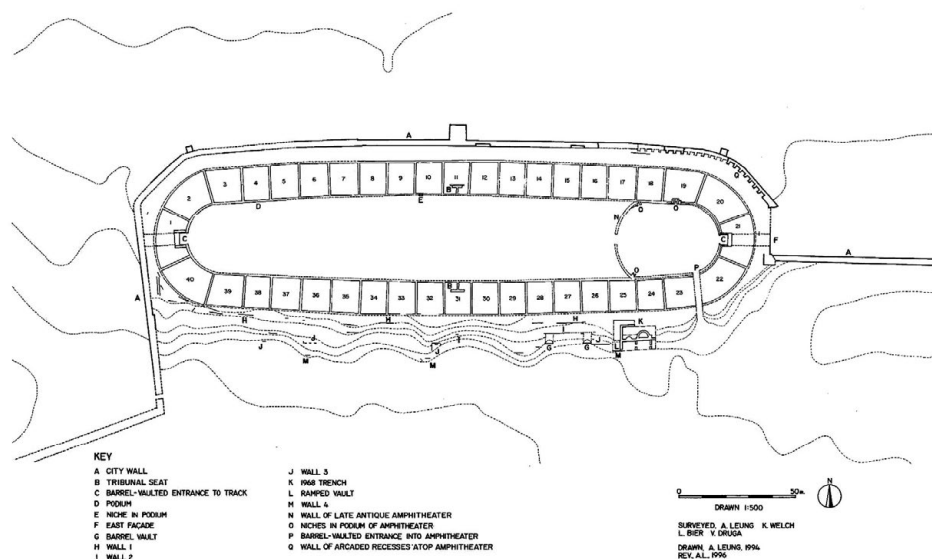


Fig. 3 – The Aphrodisias stadium plan.
(Source: Welch 1998, 549, fig.2)

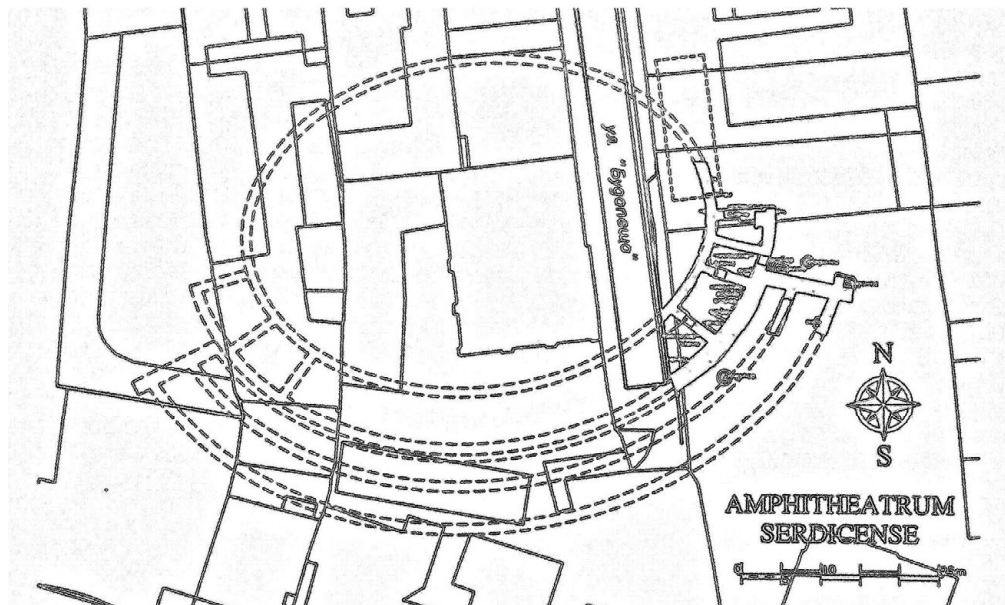


Fig. 4 – The Serdica amphitheatre plan.
(Source: Kirova 2012, 235, fig.30)