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MODELS AND FUNCTIONS OF THEATERS IN ROMAN NORTHERN GAUL: THE THEATRICAL MONUMENT OF BRIGA (EU, “BOIS-L’ABBÉ”, FR)*

Jonas Parétias, Étienne Mantel

Keywords: *Gallia Belgica*, Briga, theater, *proscenium*, monumental architecture

Parole chiave: *Gallia Belgica*, Briga, teatro, *proscenio*, architettura monumentale

Abstract

In the field of studies of ancient theatrical buildings, the emergence and evolution of Italian architectural models is a central issue in current research, especially since numerous theatrical buildings are located in Gallic provinces. In the town of Briga (“Bois-l’Abbé” Archeological Site in Eu, France), located in Gallia Belgica, the Theater was built about 200 m from the main temple, probably at the end of the 1st century or at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Information about the layout, the discovery of an epigraphic inscription in the Theater and the preservation of blocks belonging to the ornament of the stage building provide substantial evidence for knowledge of this geographical space. This building was integrated into a considerable town-wide program of embellishment and monumentalization of public buildings at the beginning of the 3rd century. Based on the excellent data at our disposal, this monument offers an illustration of architectural choices and exemplifies the use of theaters in a monumental complex. How were they connected with neighbouring public monuments? What role did they play? The Theater at Briga is a perfect case study to understand their function and their insertion in a Roman town of the northern provinces.

Nel campo degli studi sui teatri antichi, la nascita e lo sviluppo di modelli architettonici italici rappresentano, nella ricerca attuale, un nodo centrale, specie alla luce dell’esistenza nelle province galliche di numerosi edifici teatrali. Nell’insediamento di Briga (l’attuale sito archeologico di Bois-l’Abbé presso Eu, in Francia), nella Gallia Belgica, il Teatro fu costruito a circa 200 m dal tempio principale, forse alla fine del I o agli inizi del II sec. d.C. I dati relativi al progetto complessivo, il rinvenimento di un’iscrizione all’interno del Teatro e lo stato di conservazione dei blocchi pertinenti alla decorazione della sua frons scaenae forniscono elementi sostanziali per la conoscenza del sito. L’edificio era parte di un imponente programma di decoro e monumentalizzazione degli edifici pubblici avvenuto agli inizi del III secolo ed esteso a tutto l’insediamento. Sulla base dei dati a disposizione, il monumento in esame fornisce un’immagine precisa circa le scelte architettoniche adottate, esemplificando il ricorso alla costruzione di teatri all’interno di un insieme monumentale. Che relazione stabilivano con le emergenze circostanti? Quale il loro ruolo? Il Teatro di Briga rappresenta in questo senso un importante caso-studio, che consente di comprenderne la funzione e le ragioni all’origine del suo inserimento nel paesaggio urbano di una piccola città romana delle province settentrionali.

In the western provinces, the emergence and evolution of architectural models first developed in Italy is a central issue in recent studies of public monuments, especially those which consider theatrical buildings. The *Tres Galliae* (*Aquitania*, *Lugdunensis*, and *Belgica*) have, in this regard, always aroused particular interest because of the large concentration of theaters in this geographical space compared to other provinces of the empire¹. For lack of knowledge about the structure of the buildings and how they fit with surroundings, most of the studies were conducted using analogy by referring to buildings that yielded more complete primary information.

Given how exceptionally complete its evidence is for the North of the Three Gauls, a few gaps notwithstanding, the Theater at Briga (“Bois-l’Abbé” Archeological Site in Eu, France) provides an illuminating case study of the architectural choices that shaped it and constitutes an important regional milestone for the study of the role of theaters

* We would like to express our gratitude to J.-Y. Marc, S. Blin, S. Dubois, and C. Daniel for their assistance and insight. This article,

originally written in French, was translated by Joshua Richeson.

¹ SEAR 2006; DUMASY 2011.

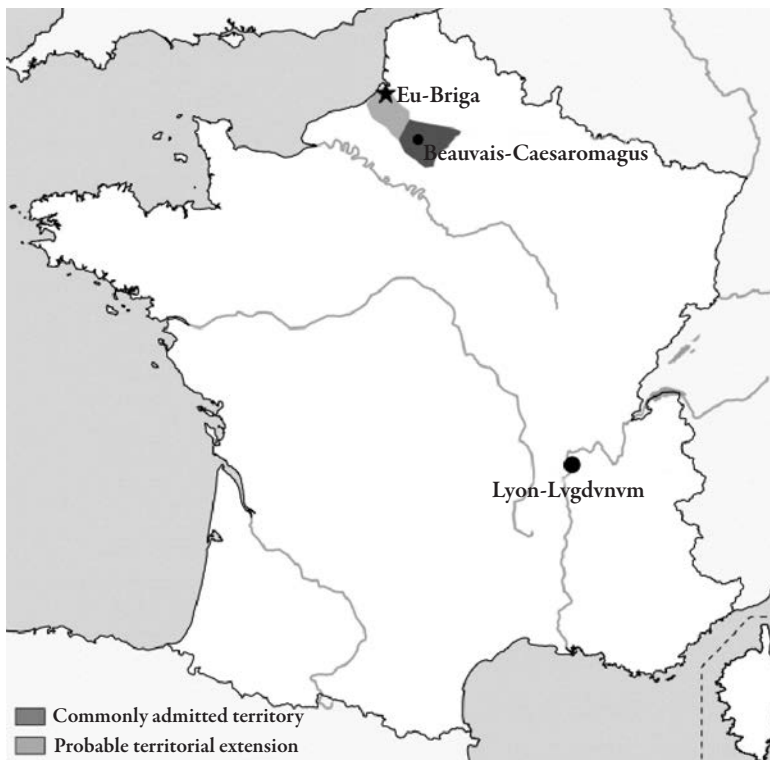


Fig. 1. Site plan of the town of Briga, probably located in Bellovaci territory (after MANTEL, DUBOIS 2017, p. 182 fig. 1).

within large public monumental complexes². The following article offers an updated reading of this theater, drawing on both historic evidence from past excavations and new data obtained from over ten years of current research at the town of Briga. The place occupied by this monument will be questioned on two scales: with regard to the public monumental complex built nearby and within the larger complex that is this town in the North of the Three Gauls.

Public architecture issues in the North of the Three Gauls

Although the documentation required for specialized studies is abundant in the North of the Three Gauls, this geographical area remains nonetheless a space where research on public architecture is still undeveloped. This paradox can be explained by the still visible or manifest presence of remains preserved in *Gallia Aquitania* and *Gallia Lugdunensis*, which contrasts sharply with the lack of visibility of ancient monuments in the current urban topography of the towns of northern France. This difference in conservation has had an unfavorable prismatic effect on the northern provinces – *Gallia Belgica* in particular – where only a few buildings are visible in elevation. The apparently more limited development of the monumental panoply in the North gives the impression of a correlation between the visibility of remains in the urban landscape and the degree of Romanization of a territory. The successive undertakings which recuperated construction materials, and which were more intense in the North of the Three Gauls, make up one of the factors that explain the low number of remains still preserved in elevation in these regions. At the same time, the discovery of countless *membra disiecta* belonging to the architectural ornament of buildings attests that numerous monuments are still unknown. This fragmentation of the archeological record directly resulted in a real disinterest in matters of architecture in these regions, keeping alive the idea of a region impervious to Romanity, which would result in a lesser Romanization of these territories³. Paradoxically, administrative centers are not always the principal source of information for carrying out studies on public municipal building projects, the monumental panoply and spaces devolved to the civic institutions (the forum, in particular) of a *civitas*. For example, Beauvais-Caesaromagus, despite its standing as the administrative center of the *Civitas Bellovacorum* during the Roman period, has so far only provided a very limited number of architectural records⁴. Recent research carried out under the best auspices in the surrounding administrative centers (Bavay-Bagacum⁵, Amiens-Samarobriua⁶...) or in the territory's so-called “secondary” towns⁷

² KOZŁOWSKI, FERREIRA 2018.

³ MARC 2011, pp. 230-231.

⁴ WOIMANT 1995, pp. 136-160; BAYARD, COLLART, MAHÉO 2004.

⁵ DELMAIRE 2011.

⁶ BAYARD, MASSY 1983; PICHON 2009.

⁷ This contemporary term, which groups together very different occupations, has been widely used in the scientific literature since the 1980s (MANGIN, JACOB, JACQUET 1986). Its considerable use has been the object of sharp criticism since it leads to a hierarchization that had no legal reality in Roman times (DONDIN-PAYRE 2007, p. 402;

(Beaumont-sur-Oise⁸, Pont-de-Metz⁹, etc.; or this paper's focus, Eu-Briga) allow us to provide new field data and update the study of urban complexes, their components and their ornament¹⁰.

Chronology of the occupation of the town of Briga

Located in *Gallia Belgica*, on the northern border of *Gallia Lugdunensis*¹¹, and probably attached to the *civitas* of the Bellovaci (fig. 1)¹², the town of Briga – whose name, previously unknown from ancient and medieval sources, is attested since 2006 thanks to the discovery of an epigraphic inscription announcing the presence of a basilica that has since been excavated¹³ – was established on the narrow plateau of Beaumont, 135 m above sea level, towering above the Bresle valley to the North and the dale of Saint-Pierre-en-Val to the South-West. Studies carried out between 2006 and 2018 under the direction of Étienne Mantel have allowed for considerable renewal of knowledge about this site, considered since its discovery in the 19th century to be a simple, isolated sanctuary with a temple, theater and annexes¹⁴ (fig. 2). At the site called “Bois-l'Abbé,” where a continuous human presence can be traced back to at least the Middle La Tene period (300/250 BC), it is only in the decades which follow Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul that a “city” is established. In the early 1st century AD, in the Tiberian period to be exact, a little town made up of small living quarters within a defense system (ditch, *agger* and palisade) of around 5 hectares is dominated by a sacred area¹⁵ to the West, which is bound by a 2 hectares enclosure¹⁶. In the 70s, an important reorganization is put into place, with the relocation of all inhabitants outside the enclosure. This migration correlates with the first development of urban organization (creation of the road network, blocks and neighborhoods). At the same time, the destruction of former housing in the fortified enclosure creates a major open public space¹⁷. Over the following decades, the public complex is progressively monumentalized alongside the development of the city, occurring in two major, successive phases of expansion and embellishment of public buildings, first at the beginning of the 2nd century (fig. 3), then early in the 3rd century. At its height during the Severan period, the town, which then covers at least 65 hectares based on the pedestrian survey directed by Étienne Mantel¹⁸, features a vast public monumental complex¹⁹ (fig. 4). This complex consists of a sacred area which includes a main “mixed”²⁰ temple (32 m x 28 m), surrounded by 4 (then 5) central-plan buildings (*fana*) connected by a *quadriporticus* acting as a *peribolos*, a basilica installed along the road East of the temple, a large public space and shops²¹. The town served as the administrative center of a *pagus*, according to two inscriptions discovered on the public buildings of Briga, one of which comes from the *proscenium* of the Theater (*cf. infra*) and the second from the Basilica²². At the end of the 3rd century, probably starting in AD 270, the public space is abandoned, then progressively dismantled, which, based on current information, aligns with the general chronology for the whole of the town, which met a massive decline in that period²³.

The characteristics of the theatrical building at Briga

The location of the theatrical building was chosen for its topographic and orographic characteristics. Particularly uneven, the site stands out atop the Beaumont plateau in remarkable relief against the surrounding area (fig. 5). These imposing remains have of course attracted attention since the 19th century, prompting sporadic explorations by workers financed by local scholars²⁴ (fig. 6). Situated North-Northeast/South-Southwest, the high rise of semicircular land that forms the Theater is located 207 m down from the center of the sacred area, on the eastern slope of the plateau dominated by the main temple. The choice to site the building on the hillside attests to the builders' deliberate wish to optimize the natural features of the terrain.

MARC, BLIN 2010, pp. 23-24). It is, however, still widely used, not as a pejorative, but simply because it “captures the idea of subordination to the administrative center” (MALIGORNE 2012, p. 117 f.n. 3).

⁸ VERMEERSCH 2007; VERMEERSCH, JOBIC, LE COZ 2012.

⁹ BLONDIAU 2016.

¹⁰ BAYARD, COLLART, MAHÉO 2004; HANOUNE 2007; DORION-PEYRONNET 2009.

¹¹ CHASTAGNOL 1995; MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

¹² MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

¹³ MANTEL, DUBOIS, DEVILLERS 2006.

¹⁴ ESTANCELIN 1825; COCHET 1874.

¹⁵ For a definition, see: CAZANOVE, MÉNIEL 2012, p. 7.

¹⁶ MANTEL, DUBOIS 2013.

¹⁷ MANTEL, DUBOIS, JONVEL 2015.

¹⁸ MANTEL 2010.

¹⁹ The monumental panoply and the sculptural decoration of public buildings at Briga is the focus of a PhD thesis, entitled “Public monumental buildings and complexes in northern Gaul from the 1st cent. to the end of the 3rd cent. CE: architecture, organization and decoration from the example of the town of Briga (Eu, “Bois-l'Abbé,” Seine-Maritime),” under the direction of Prof. J.-Y. Marc at the Université de Strasbourg.

²⁰ For a definition of this category of building, see: MALIGORNE 2006, p. 42; MALIGORNE 2012.

²¹ MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

²² MANTEL, DUBOIS, DEVILLERS 2006: *AE* 2006, 00837 = *AE* 2007, 980 = *AE* 2009, 904.

²³ MANTEL, DUBOIS 2017.

²⁴ A complete account of the archives of former excavations and research on the building, from its discovery to today, was done for publication (MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming).

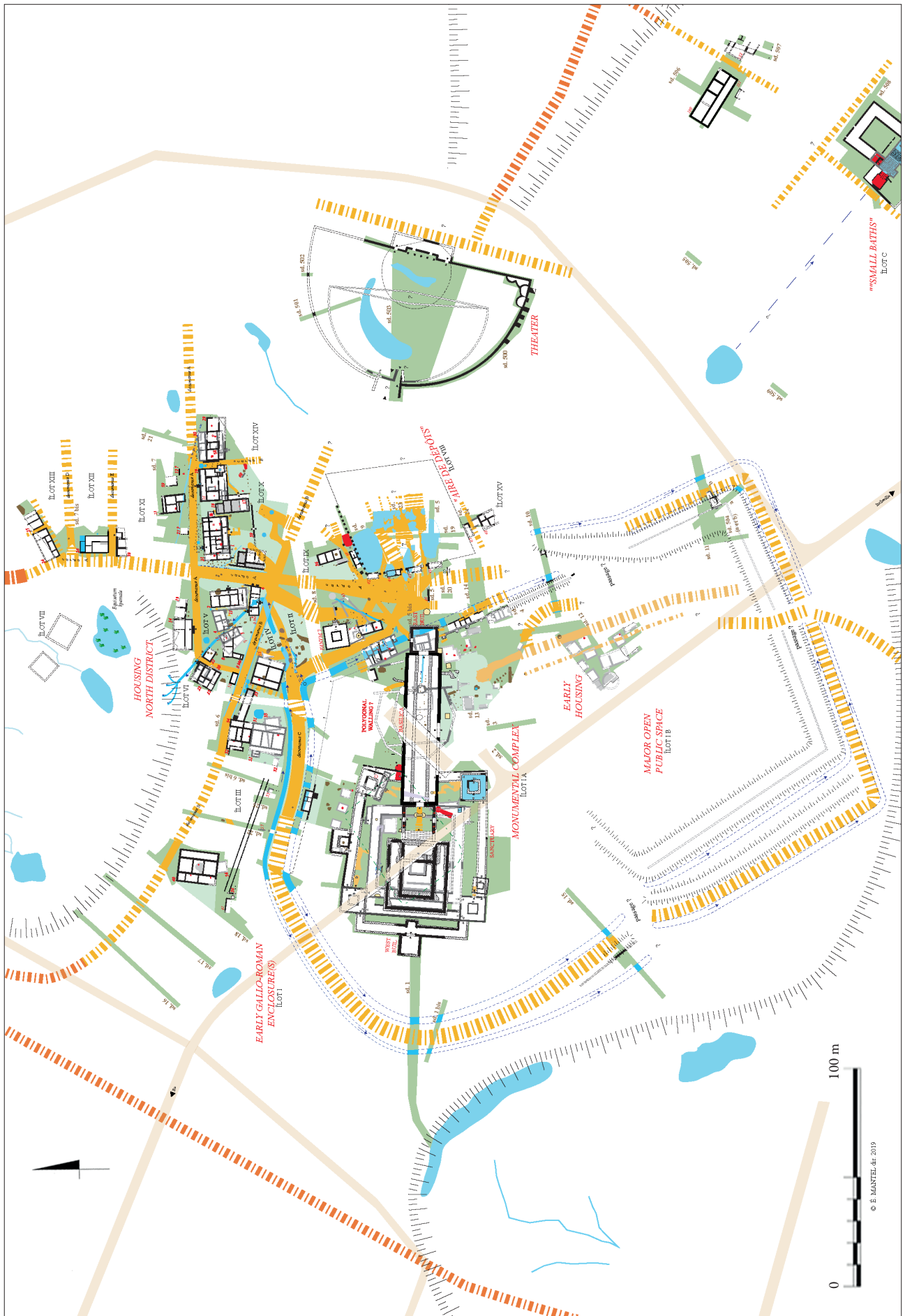


Fig. 2. Interpreted plan of remains discovered to the Northwest of Briga, all phases confounded (Étienne Mantel 2019, CAD Jonas Parétias).

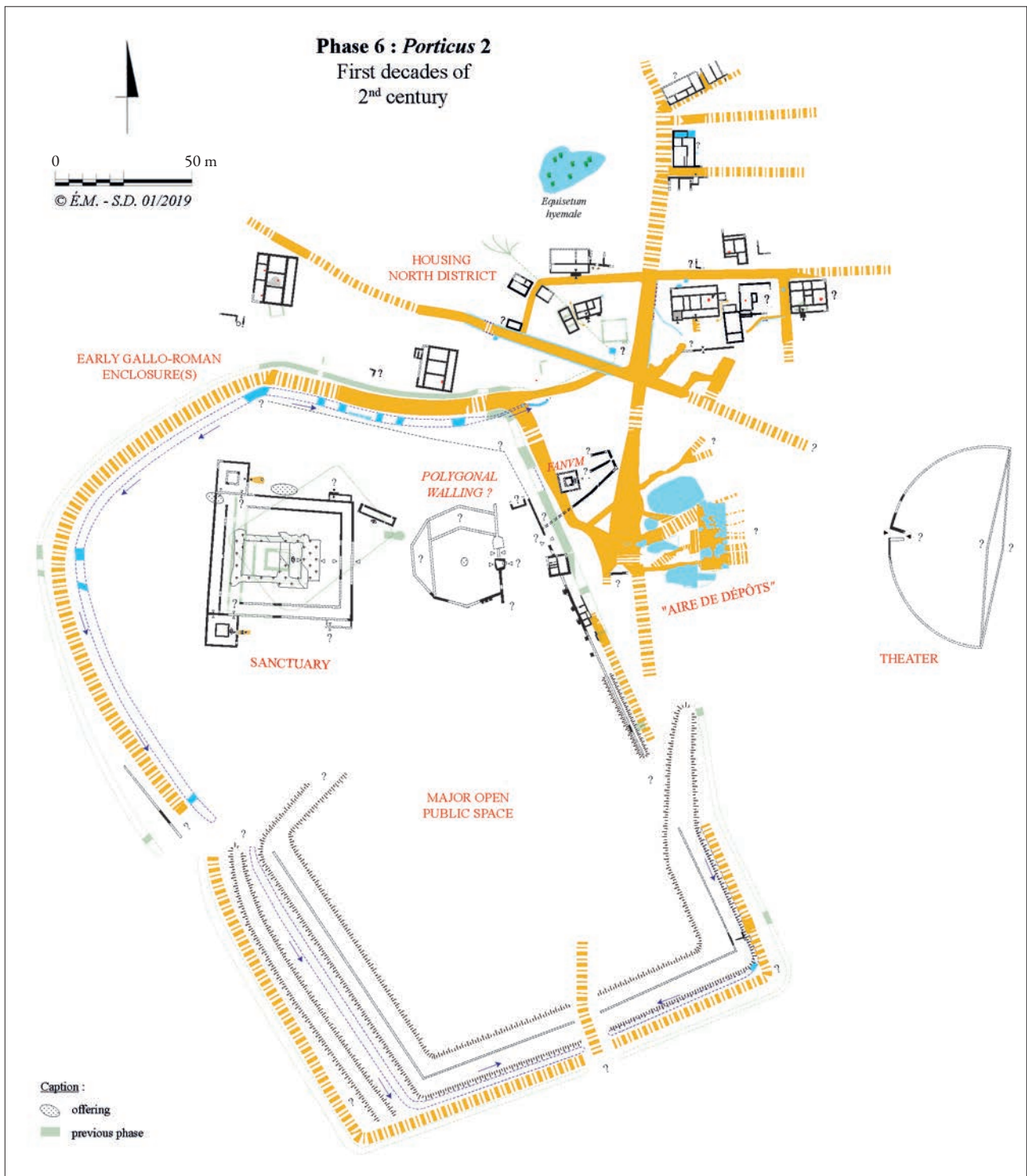


Fig. 3. Buildings and constructions: First decades of 2nd century (Phase 6, stage of research in early 2019, Étienne Mantel and Stéphane Dubois 2019, CAD Jonas Parétias).

The research undertaken by Michel Mangard between 1965 and 1973 partially revealed the general layout of the building (fig. 7), and the discovery *in situ* of more than a half of one inscription in the project's first year marked a decisive turn for archeological research at "Bois-l'Abbé". From the day it was uncovered, this inscription has attracted the attention of specialists, and it quickly resonated beyond the regional level after its presentation in the 1989 exhibition "Archéologie de la France. 30 ans de découvertes" organized at the Grand Palais in Paris²⁵. Michel Mangard, who devoted himself to editing a volume on the sanctuary²⁶, was unfortunately unable to publish the exhaustive results

²⁵ MOHEN OLIVIER 1989, p. 304.

²⁶ MANGARD 2008.



Fig. 4. Buildings and constructions of the public and center and north district in the 3rd century (Phase 8, stage of research in early 2019, Étienne Mantel and Stéphane Dubois 2019, CAD Jonas Parétias).

of these research campaigns before his death. Save for the publication *in extenso* of the inscription and a few excavation reports in the journal *Gallia*²⁷, the Theater has not been the subject of a monograph. As the foremost reason for the site's notoriety in the 20th century, the inscription continues to be frequently cited in the scientific literature dealing with theaters in the northern provinces, particularly since written sources are rare in the region. The recent publication of the August symposium on theatrical architecture illustrates the sustained interest for this epigraphic document²⁸.

²⁷ MANGARD 1982; BOÜARD 1966; BOÜARD 1968; BOÜARD 1972; BOÜARD 1974; MANGARD 1976; MANGARD 1978.

²⁸ In total, 14 occurrences mentioning Briga's Theater are published in 5 articles in the proceedings of the symposium (HUFSCHMID 2016a).



Fig. 5. Aerial view of “Bois-l’Abbé” in the mid-1970s (taken in winter by Roger Agache, French Ministry of Culture). 1: Sacred site; 2: Theater.

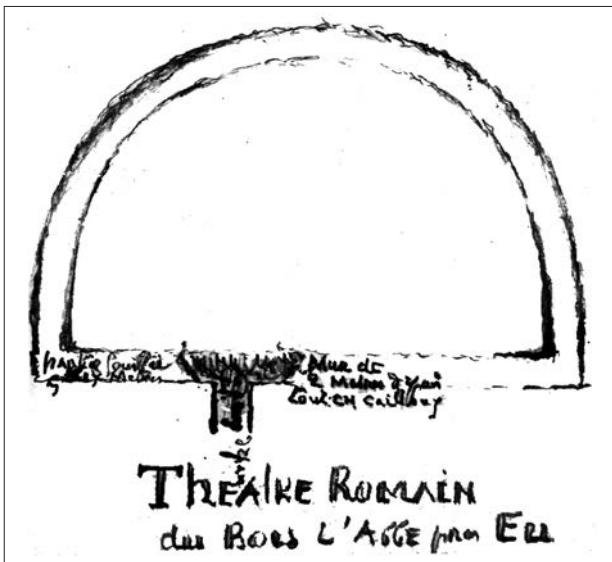


Fig. 6. Sketch of the Theater by Paul-Henri Cahingt, circa 1872 (Seine-Maritime Departmental Archives, Collection 6F1, Volume IV-2).

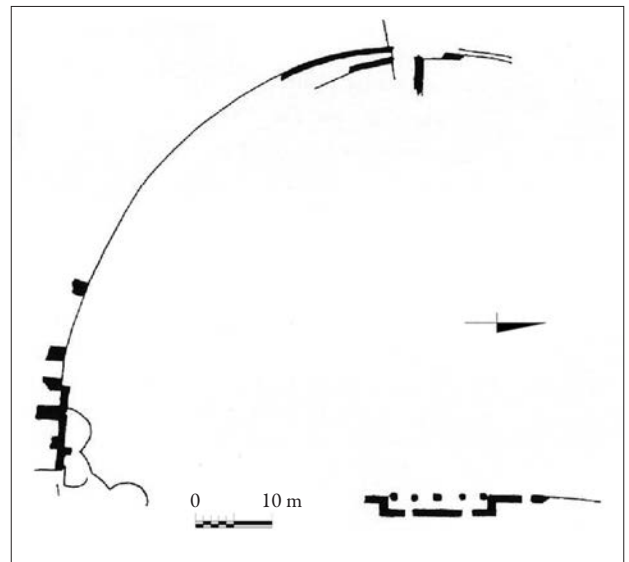


Fig. 7. Plan showing the two phases of the Theater after Michel Mangard’s excavations (after MANGARD 1982, p. 36 fig. 2a).

The privileged place it occupies in approaches to contextualizing the establishment of the monument has practically eclipsed all its other characteristics (structural, architectural, decorative, etc.) which are only rarely cited for lack of research. Based on current information, which requires clarification and confirmation through complementary surveys in the coming years, two successive phases can be distinguished (fig. 8).

Several sections of the outer masonry wall and the start of a passageway have been unearthed (fig. 8, no. Ia), attesting, by relative chronology, to the existence of an early phase of the theatrical building at this location. These sections are made up of masonry upon which were built walls of perishable material, wattle fencing covered in cob, whose height remains conjectural²⁹. The absence of foundations and the choice of construction materials used during the building process suggest the structure was made of light materials. Wood seems to have been preferred for the building of the support structure – tiers of seats and stage devices – since no lapidary materials that could be attributed to this monument have been discovered to date. The general layout is very partially known for lack of substantial surveying in this topographically challenging zone. The diameter from the first analysis of the building, initially estimated to be between 80 and 90 m, was based on an erroneous reading of the general layout drawn up during Michel Mangard's excavations³⁰. A more accurate measurement would be around 74 m in diameter³¹. The dating elements available for establishing the period when the first phase of the Theater's construction took place are very limited and call for caution, making the chronology for this first theater the end of the 1st century or the beginning of the 2nd century³². Based on observations made in the field, a fire was most likely the cause of its destruction, leading at some unknown point to the construction of a second, larger building to replace the first one³³.

With a maximum footprint still preserved in the current topography, the second phase of the Theater is better known thanks to Michel Mangard's excavations and the documentation of microtopographic readings performed between 2010 and 2016 by Étienne Mantel and Richard Jonvel³⁴. On account of its considerable dimensions and the precautions necessary to lead a research program for this category of building, the entire monument was heavily surveyed during successive campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s. The investigations helped establishing the building's general dimensions and constitutive parts, which were characterized and symmetrically restored in order to devise a general layout of the Theater. The outer masonry wall, 102 m in diameter, which makes up the *cavea* still forms the most visible part in the current landscape (fig. 8, no. IIa). The building is adapted to the terrain's topography, which has been accentuated by a considerable earth fill on its upper side to support the *cavea*. At the end of the 1990s, a stratigraphic cut into the upper parts of the *cavea* alone made it possible to restore a 21°-slope to the interior³⁵. To compensate for successive thrusts of earth fill, support structures were installed to limit the strain on the building masonry, and a buttressing talus was fashioned at the building's exterior to reinforce the structure. Completing this arrangement, two other types of adjustments were implemented to fortify the *cavea*. On the external side of the outer masonry wall, whose southern part alone has been surveyed, six quadrangular buttresses (fig. 8, no. IIb) have been unearthed, as well as four honeycombed, semicircular internal buttresses designed to reinforce the part most subjected to thrust (fig. 8, no. IIc), situated where it joins the rectilinear façade (fig. 8, no. IId). They attest to the need to shore up the masonry to bear the stress linked to the artificial raising of the *cavea*. The mechanized interventions and probes carried out by Michel Mangard over around a third of the *cavea* did not however unearth any stone seating, despite the fact that research in a sufficiently vast zone made it conceivable that some would be discovered. The absence of archeological masonry materials inside the shell of the *cavea*, including at the level of the *ima cavea* where specific installations for prominent citizens are commonly detected, like at Dahleim-Ricciacus in *Gallia Belgica*³⁶, suggests that seats were designed using perishable materials (wood, mainly³⁷), a hypothesis that has never since been questioned³⁸. With its size and holding capacity, the Theater occupies an important place in the structuring of a city and requires the implantation of specific devices, notably to manage the inherent movements and flows of the crowd³⁹. The discovery of walls aligned along the symmetrical axis of the Theater (fig. 8, no. IIe) documents the probable existence of a passageway leading to the axial part of the *cavea*⁴⁰, at the top of the plateau. At the current stage of knowledge, this radial passage (*vomitorium*), located centrally at the back of the monument, is the only one that is archaeologically attested. The whole of the building is enclosed by the rectilinear façade (fig. 8, no. IId) which ensures the junction with the outer masonry wall, itself recognized to the North and South over several dozens of meters of sections.

The stage building, which measures 27.4 m x 6.4 m (29 m x 8.1 m, with masonry), has a north-south orientation and is centrally located on the rectilinear façade (fig. 8, no. IIff). This building, which is in the form of π , includes a rectangular space measuring 13.3 m long and 1.7 m deep (fig. 8, no. IIg). The distance between the wall and the colonnade, attested in the façade by the presence of five quadrangular limestone cubes, counts between 1.3 and 1.5 m,

²⁹ Its configuration and height could be compared to what we know about Blicquy's Theater (GILLET, DEMAREZ, HENTON 2009).

³⁰ CHOLET 2004, p. 14.

³¹ MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ MANGARD 1968, p. 18.

³⁴ MANTEL, DUBOIS, JONVEL 2015.

³⁵ CHOLET 2004, p. 14.

³⁶ HENRICH 2015.

³⁷ The hypothesis is put forward by Michel Mangard at the end of the excavation (MÜLLER 1990, p. 83).

³⁸ CHOLET 2004, pp. 13-14; CHOLET 2010, p. 31; MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

³⁹ LETELLIER 2011.

⁴⁰ MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

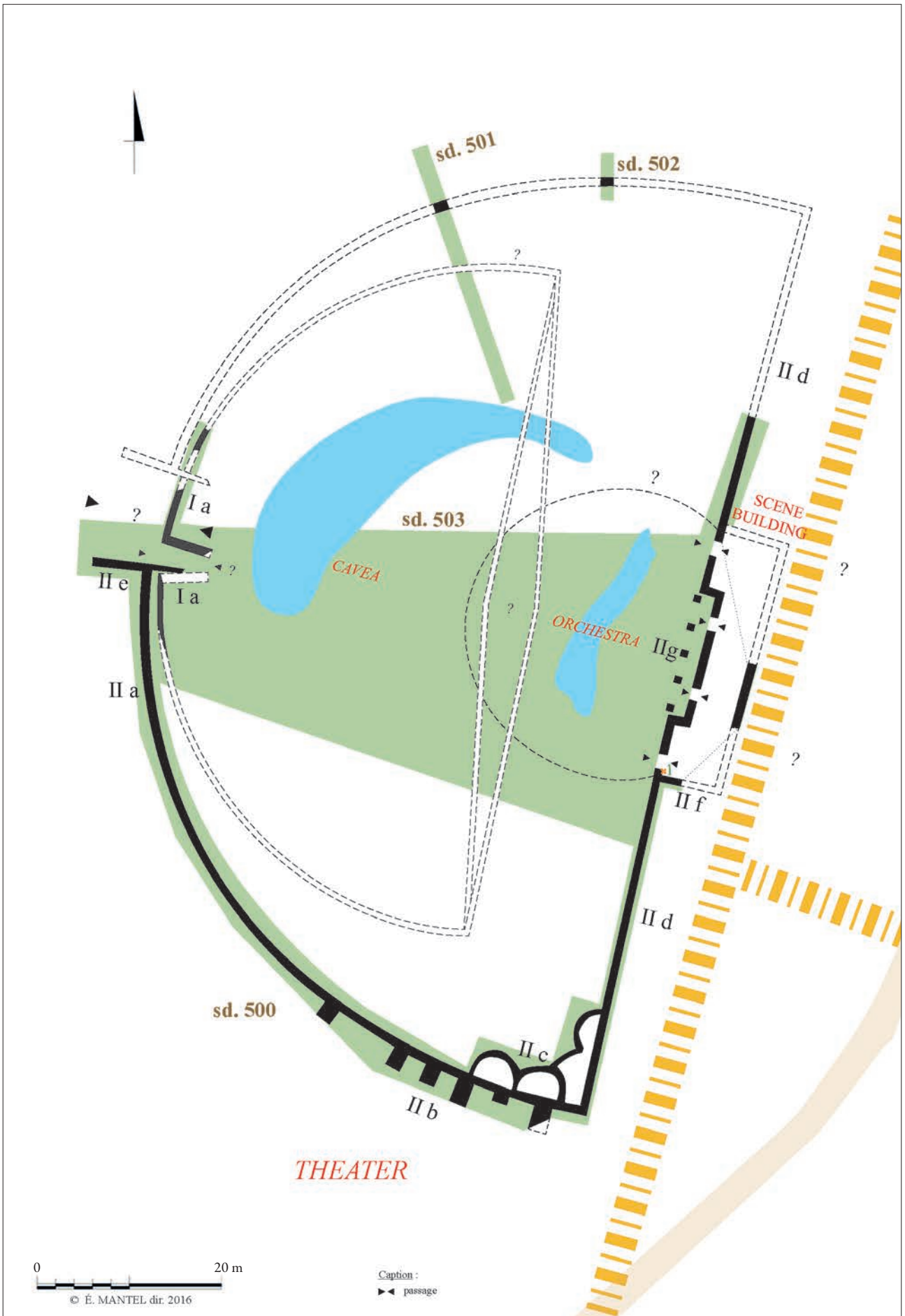


Fig. 8. Interpreted plan of the two phases of the Briga Theater (Étienne Mantel 2016, CAD Jonas Parétias).



Fig. 9. View to the Southeast of the *proscenium* and its western edge during excavation (taken by Michel Mangard, 1966, n. 3).

to which the width of the cubes adds 0.8 m, for a total depth of around 2.1-2.3 m, with masonry. At the front of this tight space, whose function has been discussed at length⁴¹, a wooden stage likely was developed in the *orchestra*. Four openings were made in the western façade of the building, with several of its foundations still partially conserved in elevation. Two doors framed the façade and were slightly decentered at the level of the pilasters while two other access passages, symmetrically arranged, allowed movement between the colonnade and the scene building. Built of blocks of limestone, tuff and flint nodules, the masonry is reinforced by brick links, with all local materials, abundant in the area. The study of the inscription of the monument establishes a probable construction date around the end of the 2nd century or the beginning of the 3rd century. The construction chronology coincides with a phase of expansion and urban development in Briga. This dating would match with its integration into a considerable town-wide program of embellishment and monumentalization of public buildings⁴².

Architectural decoration of the Theater at Briga

What is interesting about the Theater at Briga lies in the discovery of *in situ* architectural, decorative and epigraphic elements which provide an exceptional record of the building. In the North of the Three Gauls, the partial (and mostly reconstructed by extrapolation) layout of a monument is often the only information that archeologists have. At Briga, elements from the architectural decoration of the scene building and fragments belonging to a major dedicatory inscription fragment were unearthed by Michel Mangard in 1965. These can be attributed to the second state of the theatrical building and confer an exceptional character upon this theater in the northern provinces⁴³.

At the front of this scene building (fig. 9), before five plinths and the central column base, still present *in situ*, a level of collapsed roof and construction material delivered a homogenous lapidary *corpus* of 70 more or less altered blocks.

They belong to the three components of the colonnade of the architectural device composing the façade of the scene building. These columns consist of a double-torus base and a very narrow scotia topped by intermittently decorated shafts with varied ornament (fig. 10): imbrications, cabling, fluting and figurative scenes, the only conserved one showing

⁴¹ FINCKER, TASSAUX 1992; TARDY 2009.

⁴² MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

⁴³ MANGARD 1982: *AE* 1978, 00501 = *AE* 1982, 00716 = *AE* 2006, 00836.



Fig. 10. Briga, Theater. Components of the colonnade of the architectural device composing the scene building façade (photos: J. Parétias).

a dancing bacchante with two elements characteristic of Dionysiac iconography⁴⁴. These columns, 0.5 m in diameter, were crowned by composite capitals whose blocks are very fragmented. At the current stage of research, no element in stone belonging to the entablature has been uncovered, lending strength to the hypothesis of the use of wood for the upper parts of the structure, a hypothesis furthermore bolstered, *a priori*, by the metallic objects that have been found on site.

The scope of the construction, linked among other things to the façade of the scene wall and the means mobilized, does not exclude the possibility that measures were taken to save considerable expense. Indeed, the presence of sculptural decoration, reduced to its congruous portion, is above all concentrated in the most visible part of the building. Its ornamentation, which constituted the true focal point for spectators positioned in the *cavea*, was nevertheless not spared by certain restrictions, as attests the stiffer limestone than that used for the sculpted blocks of the sacred area. The absence of decorative elements like mural paintings or marble facings again illustrates the choices made by the benefactor behind the financing of the construction. Beyond the imposing size of the building, the only expression of a certain deliberate ostentation on behalf of the sponsor is found in the realization of an inscription of 11.12 m in length, engraved on six contiguous limestone plaques and displayed at the level of the colonnade's wooden entablature. By occupying a central position in the architectural array, its placement made the inscription impossible for the crowd to miss, all while giving the impression that the building's façade was entirely built of stone. This epigraphic record, with over half its length preserved, has been entirely restored (fig. 11). The documentary nature of this inscription is undeniable and helps to re-situate the town of Briga in its political and administrative context in Roman times. Beyond the common formulas, the inscription reveals that the benefactor Lucius Cerialius Rectus – who, according to his *cursus honorum*, was among the most influential figures in his *civitas* of origin – made the dedication in honor of a *pagus* and an undetermined divinity, probably Mercury or Mars⁴⁵. It provides information about the name of this monument offered to the community and designated as a “[*theatru*]m cum *proscenio* [*et suis ornamentis*]”. Knowledge of the term utilized in ancient times to designate this theatrical design, also attested in plan, is very useful information for carrying

⁴⁴ PARÉTIAS, forthcoming.

⁴⁵ The letter “M,” originally located at the beginning of the third plate, was interpreted as indicating to which deity the theatrical building was dedicated. From the *editio princeps* of this inscription, the name “Mars” has been preferred (MANGARD 1982). As discoveries since 2006 have

shown the important role accorded to Mercury, attested by a bronze statuette and two distinct inscriptions (MANTEL 2010; MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming), it is possible that the Theater was equally associated with the god of commerce, voyages and bandits. Upon review, its location is now considered to be at the end of the third plate.

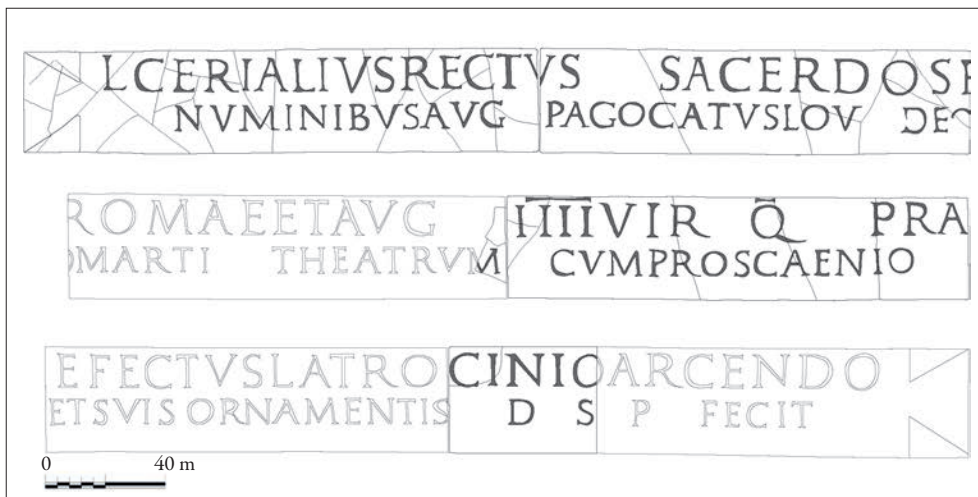


Fig. 11. Drawing and restoration of the dedicatory plaque discovered in 1965 in the Theater (drawing by Martine Bailleux, published in MANGARD 1982, p. 42bis fig. 13; adaptation by Matthieu Richard, after MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming).

out studies on the reception of architectural models in the northern provinces. Although the use of the term “Gallo-Roman theater” by archeologists suggests that some theaters of the Three Gauls had a different function than the other theatrical buildings in the rest of the empire, available archeological and epigraphic records do not support this expression. Employed to designate a building with a layout that is distinct, in appearance, from the canonical model elaborated in Italy then diffused in all the provinces of the empire⁴⁶, the very existence of this typological category has been called into question for over a decade⁴⁷. Taking into account the benefactor’s choice of a well-known Latin term to describe the monument at Briga, the absence of a true stage wall or a *pulpitum* does not necessitate, in ancient times, a semantic distinction based on the typological characteristics of buildings.

The Theater’s place in the urban fabric

The significant density of theatrical buildings in the Three Gauls and in *Germania* is especially remarkable⁴⁸, and it has often led to exceptional interest in this topographically highly visible monument, according to an exaggerated place in the interpretative scheme. Theorized in the 19th and 20th centuries⁴⁹, the concept of the isolated sanctuary thrived up until the early 1970s. Considering that there was a real imbalance between, on the one hand, the dimensions of these large built complexes composed of temples, a theater and baths, and on the other, the degree of Romanization in the provinces of ancient, “long-haired Gaul,” supposedly less apt to welcome such monumental developments, Gilbert-Charles Picard suggested identifying these monumental complexes under the Latin appellation *conciabula*⁵⁰ cited by the historian Florus⁵¹. Interpreted as isolated spaces devoted to the transmission of imperial ideology to the populations who inhabited the rural zones, they formed a major network across the territory. Although this representation has been refuted by later research and the concept is today no longer used, the expressions “large sanctuary”⁵² and “sanctuary city”⁵³ – sometimes essentially taking on the traits of the *conciabulum* and relegating urban development to a secondary role to primarily focus on the supposed religious dimension – continue to be regularly used in the scientific literature to define monumentalized architectural complexes whose urban insertion has at times not even been researched. Recent publications have proven that the relative isolation these complexes seemed to enjoy often only reflected the limits of the research at that time and that many of these complexes, once interpreted as isolated rural sanctuaries, were actually completely integrated within veritable towns, as happened recently with the examples of Genainville⁵⁴, Ribemont-sur-Ancre⁵⁵ and Briga⁵⁶. If it is now undeniable that such large public buildings were the focal point of religious,

⁴⁶ DUMASY 1975; MATTER 1992; GROS 1996, pp. 294-298.

⁴⁷ BLIN, MARC 2011, pp. 47-79.

⁴⁸ DUMASY 2007; DUMASY 2011. Since 2015, the “*Theatra*” project, directed by Jean-Charles Moretti (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) and hosted by the “Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée de Lyon”, has taken an interest in cataloguing and critically studying the theatrical monuments of the empire (<https://www.theatra.mom.fr>).

⁴⁹ JULIAN 1920, pp. 154-155. “Temple, theaters and baths are the elements of a large sanctuary. The dimensions of the temple are proof of its importance” (GRENIER 1960, p. 575).

⁵⁰ PICARD 1970a; PICARD 1970b; PICARD 1983.

⁵¹ “*Ille festis diebus et conciabulis, cum frequentissimos in lucis haberet, ferocibus dictis ad ius pristinum libertatis erexit*” (“He at their festivals and councils, when he found them collected in their greatest crowds in their groves, roused them by his ferocious harangues to vindicate their ancient rights of freedom”): Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, 1, 45 (transl. by E.S. Forster, 1929).

⁵² DONDIN-PAYRE, RAEPSAET-CHARLIER 2006, p. VIII.

⁵³ *Gisacum* 2006; GUYARD *et alii* 2015.

⁵⁴ VERMEERSCH 2012, p. 229.

⁵⁵ FERCOQ DU LESLAY 2017.

⁵⁶ MANTEL 2010; MANTEL, DUBOIS 2017; MANTEL, DUBOIS, forthcoming.

political, legal, and commercial activities, how the theater fits into these complexes is not always clearly documented by field research. In the Three Gauls, the proximity and obvious predilection for axiality between the sacred area and the theatrical building is sometimes well assured, notably at Mandeure-Epomanduodurum⁵⁷, Avenches-Aventicum⁵⁸ and Augst-Augusta Raurica⁵⁹. This well-documented topographic proximity has allowed for the development of a model in which theater and temple maintain a functional relationship with a multitude of other buildings to form the monumental panoply necessary for holding community activities⁶⁰. The comparatist approach is essential to any study of public monuments; however, it must be accompanied by a critical examination of each building studied or risk obscuring their intrinsic particularities. For it to be observed, such an association must be confronted with available elements in order to establish that a privileged link exists between a theatrical building and a surrounding sacred area. The presence of a *peribolos* wall makes it effectively possible to confidently establish the limits between sacred and profane spaces, as proven at Mandeure⁶¹. At Briga, the configuration known to date appears to be headed in this direction. It is too early to definitively decide the architectural scheme maintained by the Theater and the monumental complex; however, it must be admitted that outside the relative proximity (200 m after all) between the Theater and the sacred area, no element has permitted an organic linking of the two at the current stage of knowledge⁶². Indeed, the theatrical building does not seem to be integrated into the monumental complex since the masonry wall which encloses the public buildings, seen over several sections to the North and South of the East Building (fig. 4, no. I) and to the North of the sacred area (fig. 4, no. I), does not incorporate the Theater. This materialized spatial differentiation through a specific architectural device does not hinder a religious use of the building, the Theater being the multifunctional space *par excellence* where a considerable crowd can gather in one place for community activities, including religious ceremonies. This approach through the prism of religious practices is not exclusive and should not discount questions concerning the integration of the monument into urban development and its use for other purposes.

The estimated size of the town (at least 65 hectares) calls for caution with any transposition of a preconceived interpretative scheme. The surfaces excavated over the last fifty years – which basically cover the monumental complex and barely two residential districts (north district: survey 7; “early” settlement: surveys 12 and 13; fig. 2) – have a reductive effect that leads researchers to primarily consider the Theater in relation to the sanctuary. Given the current state of documentation, only the pursuit of research in the open air or through surveys alongside the Briga’s theatrical building will provide new data likely to help us better grasp the relations between the Theater, the monumental complex hanging over it, and the city.

This research will make it possible to characterize the structure, chronology and internal organization of the Theater, its restoration in elevation and the issues relative to how the building fits into its surroundings. This program is one of the challenges of research on the Theater at Briga, seeking to document and understand the topographical relationships between the monuments or surrounding spaces (fig. 4). The built areas in the central district, which develops to the Southeast of the building, have not at present been sufficiently explored to draw conclusions about possible interactions with the Theater. Searching for the presence of roads or paths that serve the East of its rectilinear façade as possible radial access in the outer masonry wall, researchers will be able to reflect upon accessibility and transportation issues for one of the largest and busiest public constructions at Briga. For example, a hollowed-out path discovered nearby that may have fossilized a major road across the city from East to West (*decumanus*) suggests, after microtopographic surveys, the hypothesis of a traffic way serving the theater from the East.

Conclusion

Because of the magnitude of the monuments and the means needed to explore them, theatrical buildings are mostly known in a very superficial fashion (aerial photographs, past excavations) and are very rarely the focus of exhaustive publications on the Three Gauls. Without precisely drawn plans of the elevations or exhaustive, detailed photography of the remains, the partial information available for the Theater at Briga does not only allow for more than an initial engagement with the building in all its aspects. Still, the complementarity of the available information on layout, architecture, epigraph and the surrounding area in which it developed, makes the Theater exceptional for the North of the Three Gauls and will allow researchers to carry out a complete study of the development of the theater, its chronology, its restoration, its function in the urban fabric and the community practices developed within its confines. While numerous issues persist and frustrate attempts to fully comprehend the building, the renewal of research initiated in 2019 will contribute to a better grasp of one of the largest public constructions at Briga by providing new data about the theatrical architecture of this still too little-known northern region of the empire.

⁵⁷ MARC, BLIN 2010; BLIN, MARC 2011; BARRAL *et alii* 2015; BLIN, MARC 2016.

⁵⁸ MATTER 2009.

⁵⁹ HUFSCHMID 2016b.

⁶⁰ For questions concerning the function of theater in religious festivals, see MARC 2015.

⁶¹ BLIN, MARC 2016, p. 209 fig. 1, no. 7.

⁶² MANTEL, DUBOIS, PARÉTIAS, forthcoming.

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