The Theater at Stobi

Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 120

The Theater at Stobi

Results of the Joint US-Yugoslav Archaeological Investigations, 1970-1981

Elizabeth R. Gebhard

Archaeopress Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
First and Second Floors
13-14 Market Square
Bicester
OX26 6AD

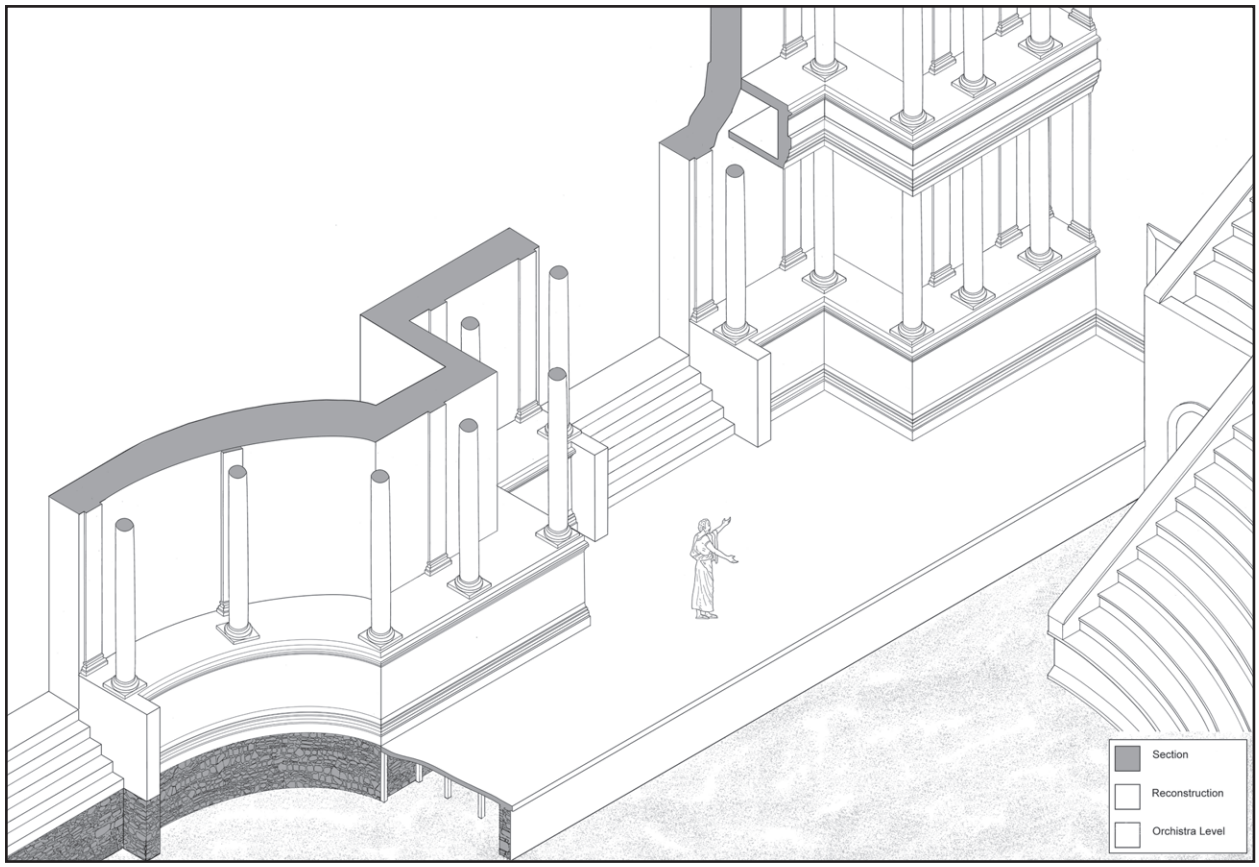
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-841-4
ISBN 978-1-80327-842-1 (e-Pdf)

Cover: Aerial view of the Theater (2018); west half of seats, looking southwest; cuirassed statue.

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

This book is for my children,
Paul R.S. Gebhard and Sophia Gebhard, and their late father Paul Gebhard
who gave up so very much for its completion.



Restored facade of Phase I. Drawing by Jonathan Stevens.

Contents

SUMMARY

The Theater at Stobi was first excavated between 1924 and 1928 by Balduin Saria of the National Museum in Belgrade, who published his results in an overall publication in 1938. Saria uncovered the west half of the cavea and the scene-building, establishing the first chronology of the structure. The theater was the subject of systematic excavations once again in the 1970s, during the American-Yugoslav project, directed by James Wiseman of Boston University, Djordje Mano-Zissi of the University of Belgrade, and Blaga Aleksova of the University of Skopje. The task of excavating the theater and revising its chronology was appointed to me, and this first volume of monograph "The Theater at Stobi" publishes the results of the 1970s excavations. A new project for excavation and conservation of theater has been initiated in 2009 by the National Institution Stobi and it is still ongoing today. The results of the new excavations are published in the second volume of the monograph, written by Goce Pavlovski.

The Theater at Stobi, first constructed around 100 AD, was initially designed according to the model of the Roman theater described by Vitruvius, commonly found in Italy and the western Roman provinces. However, the plan also included elements from amphitheater architecture in order to respond to meet the city's need for a venue that could also host gladiatorial and animal spectacles. The semicircular cavea was attached to a long and narrow scene-building, and the orchestra was surrounded by a podium. The scaenae-frons had three doorways, with a curved niche for the central one and rectangular niches for the doorways on each side. The doors were flanked by four porches with columns, and there was possibly a pulpitum. At both ends, the scene-building had large rectangular rooms known as basilicae. At the ends of the cavea, vaulted corridors called aditus maximi ran parallel to the scene-building and led from outside of the cavea, under the seats, and into the orchestra. Another corridor like this ran along the central axis of the auditorium and finished with a central room before reaching the orchestra. A central box of honor was located above this room and it was accessed through two lateral rooms with stairs, built close to the orchestra end of the corridor. Construction was halted after the walls reached varying elevations, with some exceeding three meters at the east end of the cavea. For some reason, the theater was never completed in the western Roman style.

The unfinished walls of the scene-building were dismantled and the design was altered to resemble the theaters usually found in Asia Minor. The scene-building was lowered, and the new plan included a rectilinear scaenae-frons with five doorways and six porches with columns. Five flights of stairs from the doors led into the orchestra, and a permanent pulpitum was omitted. Additionally, the colonnade on the porches featured curved bays at each end. A larger than a semi-circle cavea outlined the orchestra with a podium. Open parodoi were set at an angle to the scene-building, bordered by new marble analemmata. The aditi maximus were blocked with the orchestra podium, and transformed into radial corridors that enabled access to the first rows of seats.

Following a devastating earthquake around 300 AD, the theater was reconstructed and the orchestra was completely transformed into an arena. The parodoi were closed with gates and a wall was built in front of the scene-building. Refuges were incorporated into the podium on each side, with the central room converted into a refuge. A solid wall was built on top of the orchestra podium, curtailing the first few rows of seats. A shrine to Nemesis, featuring a large inscription and statues of the goddess, was found in the center of the scene-building. The shrine might have been there before the earthquake and it was remodeled after. The entrance appears to have been at the east end, where a large entrance hall was also constructed. The excavations of the 1920s revealed extensive wall decorations, which have since disappeared. The theater's final use seems to have occurred at the end of the 4th century, after which it was mined for materials to build other structures, and small houses were constructed over and within the corridors.

РЕЗИМЕ

Театарот во Стоби бил првпат истражуван помеѓу 1924 и 1928 година, од страна на Балдуин Сариа од Народниот музеј во Белград, кој ги објавил резултатите во сеопфатна публикација во 1938 година. Сариа го открил западниот дел од кавеата и сценската зграда, утврдувајќи ја првата хронологија на објектот. Театарот повторно бил предмет на систематски ископувања во 1970-тите години, за време на Американско-Југословенскиот проект, под раководство на Џејмс Вајсман од Универзитетот во Бостон, Ѓорѓе Мано Зиси од Универзитетот во Белград и Блага Алексова од Универзитетот во Скопје. Задачата за истражување на театарот и ревидирање на неговата хронологија ми беше доверена мене, а овој прв том од монографијата „Театарот во Стоби“ претставува публикација на резултатите од ископувањата во 1970-тите. Во 2009 година, Националната установа Стоби започна нов проект за истражување и конзервација на театарот и тој е сè уште во тек. Резултатите од новите истражувања се објавени во вториот том од монографијата, под авторство на Гоце Павловски.

Театарот во Стоби, првично изграден околу 100 година од нашата ера, бил дизајниран според моделот на римскиот театар опишан од Витрувиј, кој обично се среќава во Италија и западните римски провинции. Меѓутоа, планот исто така вклучувал елементи од архитектурата на амфитеатрите за да одговори на потребите на градот за објект во кој може да се одржуваат и гладијаторски борби и спектакли со животни. Полукружната кавеа била споена со долга и тесна сценска зграда, а оркестрата била опкружена со подиум. Scaenae frons имала три врати, со заоблена ниша за централната и правоаголни ниши за вратите од двете страни. Вратите биле фланкирани со четири тремови со столбови, а веројатно постоел и pulpitum. На двата краја, сценската зграда имала големи правоаголни простории познати како базилики. На краевите на кавеата, се протегале засводени коридори наречени aditus maximi кои биле паралелни со сценската зграда и воделе од надворешноста на кавеата, под седиштата, директно во оркестрата. Друг ваков коридор се протегал по централната оска на аудиториумот и завршувал со централна просторија, непосредно пред оркестрата. Централна почесна ложа била лоцирана над оваа просторија, а пристапот до неа го овозможувале две странични простории со скали, изградени блиску до крајот на коридорот кон оркестрата. Изградбата била прекината откако ѕидовите достигнале различни височини, а некои од нив, на источниот крај на кавеата, надминувале три метри. Поради непозната причина, театарот никогаш не бил завршен во стилот на западноримските театри.

Недовршените ѕидови на сценската зграда биле урнати и дизајнот бил изменет по моделот на театрите кои обично се наоѓаат во Мала Азија. Сценската зграда била спуштена на пониско ниво, а новиот план вклучувал праволиниска scaenae frons со пет врати и шест тремови со столбови. Пет низи на скали се спуштале од вратите во оркестрата, а перманентниот pulpitum бил изоставен од планот. Дополнително, тремовите со столбови на двата краја завршувале со заоблени ѕидови. Оркестрата била опкружена со подиум и кавеа поголема од полукруг. Во однос на сценската зграда, под агол биле формирани отворени пародоси кои биле ограничени со нови мермерни аналеми на спротивната страна. Коридорите aditi maximus биле блокирани со подиумот околу оркестрата и на тој начин трансформирани во радијални коридори кои овозможувале пристап до првите редови на седишта.

По разорниот земјотрес од околу 300 година од н.е., театарот бил реконструиран и оркестрата била целосно трансформирана во арена. Пародосите биле затворени со порти, а пред сценската зграда бил изграден ѕид. Во подиумот биле вградени засолништа на двете страни, а исто така и централната просторија била претворена во засолниште. На површината од подиумот околу оркестрата бил изграден ѕид, скратувајќи го погледот од првите неколку редови на седишта. Во средината на сценската зграда било откриено светилиште на Немеза со голем натпис и скулптури на божицата. Светилиштето можеби било таму и пред земјотресот, но било обновено потоа. Се чини дека влезот бил на источниот крај, каде што исто така бил изградена голема влезна сала. Со ископувањата во 1920-тите е откриена обемна ѕидна декорација, која не е сочувана денес. Последната употреба на театарот се чини дека се случила на крајот на 4-от век, по што објектот бил користен како извор на материјал за изградба на други објекти, а мали куќи биле изградени во и над неговите коридори.

INTRODUCTION

History

Stobi of the Paeonians lies at the confluence of the Vardar and Crna Rivers, the ancient Axios and Erigon, some 50 miles north of the modern border between Greece and North Macedonia.[1] The population and size of the city expanded early in the Imperial period, and by 69 when it began to mint its own coins, it had received the status of *municipium*. Construction of a city theater followed not long after, a sign that the city had achieved a status and a degree of prosperity that warranted such a public facility for its festivals and celebrations of communal events. Its initial construction belongs to the end of the first or beginning of the 2nd century and it was completed in the middle of the century. Prosperity at Stobi continued for several decades with architectural expansion and a material culture that included imported goods from the eastern and western provinces of the Empire.

The 3rd century brought changes to Stobi as to many other cities of the Empire, and by the end of the century a number of buildings had been damaged or destroyed. Natural disasters took their toll: flooding of the Erigon River drove inhabitants from the lower town and an earthquake about 300 severely damaged the theater. In no time, however, not only were repairs undertaken but the scene-building was remodeled and embellished. It is evident that there were both the desire and the means to improve on the older building and not merely to stabilize the damaged structure.

Under Diocletian the province of Macedonia was partitioned and the smaller region to the north, including Stobi, was named Macedonia Salutaris. Sometime before the early 5th century, perhaps *c.* 386, Stobi appears as the capital of Macedonia Secunda. The festivals for which the theater had served were no longer celebrated, and the new Christian liturgies were held in the city's churches, the largest of which was built immediately adjacent to the theater. It was shortly after the partition of the province that the theater went out of use.

[1] Livy, XLV.29.13. The history of Stobi is included in Wiseman 1986.

Topography[2]

The theater lay close to the edge of the city, 37m from the fortification wall (Fig. 1).[3] Although the wall may be as early as the time of Augustus, urban development apparently had not reached the outlying areas by the end of the 1st century.[4] In the numerous trenches in the theater that were carried to sterile soil, deposits that contained cultural material predating the building were at the north side of the orchestra where graves of Hellenistic date were disturbed during construction of the cavea (Trench XIV, Fig. 2).[5] Too little of the city plan is known for a discussion of the theater's relation to the street grid and other major buildings, but there is no indication that the cavea was adapted to a rectilinear system of city blocks. It follows the natural contours of the area.

The Erigon River (modern Crna Reka) flows about 220m from the theater. From the river the terrain rises gently (elevation from 136.46m to 137.32m above sea level) towards a ridge that runs northeast by southwest through the city. Today's impression of seats resting on a steep hillside was created by rises in the surrounding area from the 2nd to 4th centuries. After the first phase of the theater, floors within the scene-building and the orchestra show little variation in elevation. The cavea rests on radial walls with a rise of about 6m.[6] After the theater went out of use and the upper tier of seats was removed, the apse of the Episcopal Basilica of the 5th century rested on the foundations (Fig. 3).

[2] Although the cavea opens toward the southeast in the direction of the Crna River and the low hills beyond, for ease of description, it will be assumed that the cavea faced south. All dates are in the Common Era unless designated otherwise. Elevations are taken with reference to sea level.

[3] Amphitheaters were regularly placed at the edge of the town, near the wall or outside it, as at Pompeii, Corinth, and Salona (Welch 2007) as well as Italica in Spain (Garcia y Bellido 1960).

[4] Wiseman 1986, p. 39; see also introduction to Anderson-Stojanović 1992.

[5] Trench XIV, Deposits I.8-10. Blazhevska and Pavlovski 2018 summarize the 15 Hellenistic graves discovered at Stobi.

[6] The rise of *c.* 6m is only to the first level of vaults of the summa cavea substructure; a second one supported the seating. The maximum elevation of 20m of a wall with radial disposition could be at both ends of the cavea since the terrain was the lowest here (Pavlovski, pers. comm.). Probes to construction levels: (a) interior floor of the first skene, elevation 137.35-137.63; (b) surface south of the skene, elevation 137.45; (c) surface with mortar next to walls 3 and 4 at the east end of the East Porch, elevation 137.57-137.63; (d) top of the footing trench for wall 3, elevation 137.50-137.68. The nave of the 4th-century basilica constructed behind the cavea while the theater was still in use lay at an el. of about 143.31 (Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1976, pp. 274-291, pl. 15). Saria 1938, pp. 83-85 assumed that there was a natural rise in the ground beneath the cavea as he did not know of the early church.

History of Excavations

The location of the city was first recognized independently in the 1850s and 1860s by J.G. von Hahn and Leon Heuzey during their travels and research in the region. In 1902 Anton von Premerstein and Nikola Vulić recorded a number of inscriptions, but it was not until 1924 that systematic excavations began under the direction of Balduin Saria and Rudolph Egger.

The location of the theater was marked by a horseshoe-shaped depression immediately south of the Episcopal Basilica, and the presence of reused seats and stairs in the Basilica and other structures gave a sure sign of its location nearby. When Balduin Saria began systematic excavations at Stobi in 1924, he chose the theater as his starting point, sinking the first trench at the west edge of the depression that marked its site. He continued clearing the building complex during seasons in 1925 through 1928, but his efforts were hampered by his departure from the National Museum in Belgrade in 1926. Lack of funds brought the project to a halt after only one-third of the lower half of the auditorium had been laid bare and two-thirds of the scene-building. A brief return to the site in 1932 with the Danish architect Einar Dyggve enabled Saria to make a preliminary study of as much of the building as had then been uncovered, and in 1937 he published his findings in a monograph (in Serbian) supported by the Museum of South Serbia in Skopje. A somewhat shortened version was published in the *Jahrbuch* of the German Archaeological Institute in 1938.[7]

Saria was unable to continue his study of the theater after the Second World War. In 1965 and 1966 the Conservation Institute of Macedonia, under direction of Saržo Saržoski, cleared the remainder of the building, removing some six and a half meters of soil. The east and west parodoi and adjacent areas remained unexcavated. On the periphery of the seats small trenches were opened in an attempt to define the outer circumference of the cavea.

In 1970 the University of Texas at Austin and the National Museum of Titov Veles, with the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Institution, began a new series of annual excavations directed by James Wiseman and Dj. Mano-Zissi. In 1973 Boston University became the American sponsoring institution. As part of the Stobi Excavation Project from 1970-1981, at the invitation of James Wiseman, I undertook limited excavations to establish an accurate plan of the building and to establish a reliable chronology based on archaeological materials in stratigraphic sequence. The only building known at the time was the large marble theater that Saria had discovered (our Phase II). In 1973 foundations were brought to light that revealed an earlier theater (our Phase I) of a type radically different from the later building (Fig. 4). The plan resembled that found in Italian theaters and stood in sharp contrast to the Greco-Roman type adopted for the Phase II theater that was popular in Asia Minor. The discovery opened a new dimension in the history of the building, beginning at least a half-century earlier than had been recognized (late 1st century or very beginning of the 2nd century). While a plan of the Phase I theater could be restored by the time our project ended in 1981, important information about the early building only became available after the east and west parodoi were excavated by the Conservation Institute of Macedonia (1995-2001) and east half of the cavea by the National Institution Stobi (2009-2023).

The presence of the Phase I theater, the plan of which resembled contemporary theaters in Italy, added a new phase to the architectural history of the city and opened interesting questions concerning relations with Italy at that time. Chapter I is devoted to the Phase I theater, while in Chapters II and III are set out the remains of Phase II, which still dominate the site. After what appears to have been a major earthquake, placed about 300 by associated deposits, the cavea and scene-building were repaired and remodeled, and the orchestra was enclosed as a permanent arena. Chapter IV sets out the remains of this Phase III. Chapter V is devoted to the planning of Phases I and II and a summary of the building.

Conservation of some of the walls in the scene-building was undertaken by the Conservation Institute in 1995-200l. In 2009 Stobi entered a new phase with the National Institution Stobi under the direction of Silvana Blaževska. Excavation in the theater since 2009 has been directed by Goce Pavlovski. I am greatly indebted to both directors for their hospitality and generosity in allowing me access to their excavations and the opportunity to include information from parts of the theater that were revealed between 1981 and 2023. Publication of the remains, primarily in the cavea, uncovered by the new project is under the care of Goce Pavlovski and will appear as a separate volume.

[7] Saria 1938, with references to previous publications. After the war, Dyggve published two articles in *Revue Archeologique* (Dyggve 1958a, 1958b). While they grew out of his work in the theater at Stobi, they are primarily concerned with the use of theaters in the Late Empire. Dyggve suggested moving the construction date of the theater (our Phase II, the only building of which he was aware) from the period of Hadrian to the early 3rd century. However, the deposits from our excavations support a construction date in the middle of the 2nd century (see Chapters II and III). Dyggve placed the final remodeling in *c.* 325, which is probably also too late. Contextual material associated with the phase supports a date at the beginning of the century (Chapter IV).

System of Recording

Architecture

The blocks that are not in place are listed in tables throughout the text and most of them are represented in drawings and photographs. Some walls and blocks were finished with great precision, such as the façade and marble analemmata, while in other parts of the building the quarry finish was never removed or only partially cut away. The work appears to have moved from west to east, since in the cavea and scene-building the western half is more complete and the work better executed than in the east side. Numerous instances of the difference in standard are discussed throughout Chapters II and III.

Some measurements are also converted to Roman feet (e.g., 24 RF) using a foot measure of 0.294m. The length of the Roman foot used here is based on the assumption that the orchestra, measuring 29.40m, was planned with a diameter of 100 Roman Feet.[8] Arriving at the precise length of any foot used in a building is notoriously difficult and the result often uncertain and confusing. The foot of 0.294m suggested here is slightly longer than the usual Roman Foot of 0.293m. Nevertheless, when it could be tested on a well-preserved block belonging to one of the basic planning units, such as the lower diameter of the first-story columns, a foot of 0.294m seemed to fit more closely than the shorter measure. Citation of dimensions in two scales of measurement, perhaps confusing, is an attempt to show to what degree of accuracy a specific block may have been cut with reference to the architect's specification. A future study may present arguments for a different foot.

Elevations are given in terms of height above sea level. Saria's architect, Einar Dyggve, used the modern ground level as his datum point, but so much excavation has taken place since the first study that it is difficult to use his figures. Dyggve's elevations can, however, be converted to elevations above sea level when the earlier numbers can be checked against sea level using the same identifiable feature, such as the marble threshold for West Door II and the rear door in West Room II. By such correlations, Dyggve's datum point as marked on his drawings and plans was 141.86m above sea level.

Deposits

The composition of soils related to the construction, use, destruction, abandonment, and later use of the building are described and their contents listed in the Deposit Lists. Included are descriptions of soil with reference to the overlying and/or underlying deposits, fauna, glass, roof tiles, and bricks. The term 'deposit' is used here for any kind of formation and transformation process, whether natural or cultural.[9] Artifacts found within these units form the basis for our understanding of the history and architecture of the structure. To preserve a complete record of this material within its original context, all objects recovered in the excavations of 1970-1981 were saved and grouped according to lots. A lot ideally represents a single episode of deposition, i.e., soil laid down at the same time and by means of the same activity. In this way the material which had been laid down at the same time in antiquity was identified by the same designation or lot number. The lot is also the storage unit for any material that was not catalogued and may include pottery, lamps, glass, metal, faunal material, and industrial debris. Because the same deposit may have been excavated in different seasons and in areas not contiguous, however, it may be represented by a number of lots. Lots representing a single context have been combined into individual deposits.

The deposits are grouped according to the structural phases, e.g., construction, use, abandonment, destruction, and are numbered consecutively according to chapter: a Roman numeral for the chapter, followed by an Arabic numeral for the deposit: e.g., Deposit I.3 refers to Deposit 3 in Chapter I. Location is given by the trench number and reference to a section drawing. Elevations are maximum for the top and bottom of the deposit; sherd counts represent total numbers.

Virginia Anderson-Stojanović has provided the short summary of the range of pottery in each deposit, followed by a more detailed statement concerning the latest pieces.[10] The vases helpful for dating or intrinsically interesting appear in a catalogue following the deposit summary.[11] The imported wares present in the theater are well known in the Mediterranean area, and in the catalogue the standard published type series will be used to identify the forms of the various wares. Although most of the pottery from the theater can be dated only with a century or half century, and more rarely, to the quarter century, the ceramics are the best chronological indicator in the absence of inscriptions and the relatively small number of coins. Eastern Sigillata B2 is the most common imported ware in theater deposits and most examples belong to types dated by John Hayes to the second quarter of the 2nd century, and thus provide support for the proposed chronology of the construction of the theater.[12] A

[8] The diameter was measured on the lower edge of the base molding of the orchestra podium, which is largely intact.

[9] Schiffer 1987.

[10] For a study of pottery at Stobi, see Anderson-Stojanović 1992.

[11] Within the catalogue entry the first number is the Stobi Project inventory number for the object. Those items that were not inventoried are identified by their lot number. Pottery and other objects listed in the deposits are fragmentary unless otherwise noted.

[12] The term Italian Sigillata is used to describe Arretine and related Italian wares when the attribution is not certain. Type or form numbers come from Hayes "Corinth" (Hayes 1973), Hayes *EEA* 2

full description of Stobi local wares, including Color-Slipped, Plain Wares, and Cooking Wares may be found in *Stobi* I, Chapter 2, and the Lists of Deposits and chronological framework for the local typology in Chapter 4 of the same volume. Local wares may be identified by chronological period (ER, MR, LR) and form number. The typology for Macedonian Gray Ware may be found in *Stobi* I, Chapter 3.

Munsell color designations for fabric are given only for pieces whose classification or ware is uncertain.

References for those catalogue items published in *Stobi* I appear at the end of each entry. Publication references are also included in the list of inventoried items at the end of each deposit.

Acknowledgements

I owe James Wiseman a great debt of gratitude for inviting me to undertake this study of the Stobi theater. Little did he know in the summer of 1969 that it would take 55 years before the manuscript was published. His vision of its completion and his support, encouragement, and patience along the way have made it possible to continue with the project in spite of the many delays brought about by the vicissitudes of personal life and professional obligations from other projects. Delay in publication, while regrettable, has in fact resulted in a more complete exposition of the first phase of the building and a better understanding of the destruction caused by the earthquake responsible for the rebuilding in Phase III.

My second debt is owed to the three architects with whom I worked so closely during every phase of the study, the late William B. Dinsmoor, Jr., the late Frederick P. Hemans, and Jonathan Stevens. Their plans, sections, and reconstructions brought the stones to life, and the reconstruction proceeded through a dialogue between us concerning every part of the building. Fritz Hemans and I first realized the extent and significance of the first theater while working on the final drawings in Boston in 1980. In the last years since 2009 Goce Pavlovski has contributed greatly to refining and checking the sections of the manuscript devoted to the cavea and parodoi.

Study of the pottery on which almost all of the chronology of the theater depends is the work of Virginia Anderson-Stojanović. I am immensely grateful for her ceramic catalogue included in the description of deposits. We both owe a large measure of thanks to John Hayes who visited Stobi several times and helped greatly in the early stages of our chronological analysis. His enthusiasm for excavation pottery and his knowledge of the wide range of wares found at Stobi contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the deposits.

My heartfelt thanks are also due to Professor Helmut Kyrieleis, then director of the German Archaeological Institute, for a fellowship in 2000 in Berlin where I greatly benefitted from the excellent library and support of the staff. I am deeply indebted to the many assistants who have worked over the years on the inventories, photographs, typing, and collating of data in the time before electronic means were readily available, especially my son, Paul R.S. Gebhard, my daughter, Sophia Gebhard, granddaughter Jessica Gebhard, their late father, Paul G. Gebhard; Margaret Farwell Goes, Eric Sorensen, and students in the Archaeology Department of Boston University who scanned the hundreds of negatives from the 1970s excavations. Katherine Dunbabin was a sympathetic and patient traveling companion as we visited many of the theaters in Asia Minor; Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones made useful suggestions concerning the dedication to Ultrix Augusta in the Nemeseum of the scene-building. To the many others who have typed, catalogued, and encouraged me through the years, I shall remain forever grateful.

(Hayes 1985), Hayes *LRP* (Hayes 1972), Moevs 1973.