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Some Observations on the Architecture of the Roman Theatre of Iznik (Nicaea)

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Abstract

The ancient city of Nicaea, located in the Iznik district of Bursa, preserved its feature of being an important center from the Hellenistic Period to the Ottoman Period. In the city, where most of the remains from the Roman period have either been damaged or lie buried beneath the traditional residential area, the most monumental structure attesting to this period is the theatre. The first reliable information regarding the construction stages of the theatre has been obtained through the correspondence between historian and writer Plinius the Younger, who was appointed as the governor of Bithynia, and Emperor Trajan. All details mentioned in the letters, including the changes and additions made during the construction stages, have been confirmed through recent excavations. The Nicaea theatre is the only example within Türkiye's borders where seating rows (ima cavea) have been fully restored using vault and arch technology. The trapezoidal vaults supporting the lower cavea, the barrel vaults supporting the middle cavea, and the pillars supporting the upper cavea contribute to the structure of the building while also facilitating human circulation. Built with meticulous craftsmanship, the Nicaea theatre is a structure that reflects Roman characteristics while also embodying a uniquely Anatolian identity when compared to its contemporaries. As such, it possesses architectural heritage value that must be preserved. Especially; It stands out with its features such as having reliable historical information about the construction stages, hosting different cultural layers, designing in a hybrid plan, being elevated with a vaulted infrastructure, and having a basilica space, which is not common in Anatolian theatres. In 2024, The Recording, Restitution, and Restoration Project of the Roman Theatre at Nicaea have been applied to protect the multi-layered character, prevent physical destruction and transfer to the future generations in accordance with conservation principles.

Keywords: Architecture, Archaeology, Roman, Nicaea, Theatre.

İznik (Nicaea) Roma Tiyatrosu Mimarisine Dair Bazı Gözlemler

Öz

Bursa'nın İznik ilçesinde yer alan Nicaea antik kenti, Helenistik Dönem'den Osmanlı Dönemi'ne kadar bölgenin önemli bir merkezi olma özelliğini korumuştur. Roma Dönemi kalıntılarının büyük çoğunluğu

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zarar gören ya da geleneksel konut dokusunun altında kalan kentte, bu döneme tanıklık eden en anıtsal yapı tiyatrodur. Tiyatronun yapım aşamasına dair ilk gerçek bilgiler, Bithynia'ya vali olarak atanan tarihçi, yazar Genç Plinius ve İmparator Traianus arasında geçen mektuplar sayesinde edinilmiştir. Mektuplarda bahsedilen bütün ayrıntılar, yapım aşamasındaki değişiklikler ve eklemeler son yıllarda yapılan kazı çalışmalarıyla kanıtlanmıştır. İznik tiyatrosu, tonoz ve kemer teknolojisi ile tamamen ayağa kaldırılan oturma sıraları (ima cavea) ile Türkiye sınırları içerisindeki tek örnektir. Alt caveayı taşıyan trapezoidal tonozlar, orta caveayı taşıyan beşik tonozlar ve üst caveayı taşıyan paye ayakları inşaatın yükselmesinin yanında sirkülasyonu da rahatlatır. Özenli bir işçilikle yapılan Nicaea tiyatrosu, çağdaşı tiyatrolar ile karşılaştırıldığında Roma karakterinde fakat Anadolu'ya özgü bir yapıdır ve bu açıdan mutlaka korunması gerekli mimari miras niteliğe sahiptir. Özellikle; yapım aşamalarıyla ilgili güvenilir tarihi bilgilerin olması, farklı kültür katmanlarını barındırması, hibrit planda tasarlanması, tonozlu altyapıyla yükseltilmesi ve Anadolu tiyatrolarında sık rastlanmayan Bazilika mekânına sahip olması gibi özellikleriyle öne çıkmaktadır. İznik Roma Tiyatrosu Rölöve, Restitüsyon ve Restorasyon Projesi, yapının çok katmanlı özelliğinin korunması, fiziksel tahribatın önlenmesi ve koruma ilkelerine uygun olarak gelecek nesillere aktarılması amacıyla 2024 yılında uygulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mimari, Arkeoloji, Roma Dönemi, İznik, Tiyatro.

Introduction

Nicaea was located beside a wide lake and fertile plain; therefore the importance of the city increased throughout all periods[1]. The city, which is notable for its climate and geographical features, was a social, political, and economic center of the Bithynia Region (fig 1). It has always been one of the most important cities in Bithynia during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Anatolian Seljuk, and Early Ottoman Periods. The most remarkable structure of the city, which hosts many buildings from the Roman Period to the Ottoman Period (fig. 2), is the Roman theatre (fig. 3).

The first examples of this type of Roman theatre can be found in Rome, such as the Pompeii[2] and Marcellus[3] theatres, which were built in the 1st century BC. Ancient theatre structures in the entire Türkiye are dated to the Hellenistic and Roman Periods and divided into three groups according to their usage and periods[4]. The Roman theatres such as Nicaea, Side[5], Aspendus,[6] etc., and the Hellenistic theatres which lost their originality in the Roman Period

1 Strabon 12.4.7.

2 The building called as *theatrum Pompeianum, theatrum marmoreum, theatrum magnum* (Velleius 2.48; Tacitus 14.20; Cassius Dio 39.38, Plutarch 5.42.4; Platner 1929, 515); Hanson 1959, Illust. 19; Isler 2017, 658.

3 Tacitus 3.64; Cassius Dio 43.49.2; Plutarch 5.30.6; Sear 2006, 135; Montanari 2018, 41.3; Fiechter 1964, abb. 71; Parker 1997, 165, fig.4; Isler 2017, 662.

4 Öz 2000, 46.

5 Mansel 1962, 45-56; Alanyalı 2007, 84-91; Uçar 2001, 218, fig.1; Öztekin 2017, 23; Isler 2017, 705; Sear 2006, 377, plan. 401.

6 Niemann-Petersan-Lanckoronski 1890; Ferrero 1988, 65; Isler 2017, 114; Sear 2006, 366, plan.383; Boz 2006, 31, pic.41.

such as Ephesus[7], Aphrodisias,[8] etc., as well as theatres in the Hellenistic style such as Priene[9] and Pergamum[10].

The Iznik Theatre is located on the southwestern side of the city, close to the city walls and Lake Iznik (*Ascania Limme*). One of the imposing archeological structures of Anatolia, the theatre has been a frequent destination of travelers for many years. Lubenau[11] thought that this was a palace remnant, and D. Sestini[12] considered it a water depot. It was first discovered that the building belonged to a theatre by R. Pococke[13], and C. Texier[14] later demonstrated that it was part of the city. The first scientific studies were conducted by A.M. Schneider through drilling campaigns aimed at identifying the underground remains, and the sketches and photographs from these studies were published[15].

The most important information about the history of the Nicaea Theatre is obtained from letters written by the historian Pliny the Younger[16] (AD 62-113), the governor (*proconsul*) of Bithynia during the Roman Emperor Traian (AD 98-117)[17]. Pliny[18] mentions that the building had not yet been completed due to financial and stability problems[19]. He also states that it was decided to build colonnaded galleries by the public council and philanthropic citizens[20]. Although this is an important document, there is no definite information on whether the work was completed in its entirety. However, the excavations carried out in recent years suggest that the theatre was used. It remains unclear whether it was put into use while the construction was still in progress or after it was completed. The letters also fail to mention the state of the theatre after the large earthquake that occurred 12 years later[21]. In the examinations of architectural plastic elements found during excavations, differences in the architectural blocks of the same building suggest an ancient-period restoration after the earthquake.

According to Pliny's 39th and 40th letters, the theatre was still under construction in AD 111, despite 10 million sesterces having already been spent. In subsequent letters, Pliny continues

7 Heberdey-Niemann-Wilberg 1913; Scherrer 1995, 160; Styler-Aydın 2022, taf. 5; Krinzinger-Ruggendorfer 2017, taf.12.

8 Erim 1976, 25; Ferrero 1988, 51; Sear 2006, 328, plan 320; Isler 2017, 75.

9 Gerkan 1921; Bieber 1961, 108; Ferrero 1988, 34; Isler 2017, 637; Sear 2006, 349, plan 354.

10 Dörpfeld-Reisch 1907, 150; Sear 2006, 347, plan. 349; Isler 2017, 587.

11 Lubenau 1912, 221.

12 Sestini 1779, 172.

13 Pococke 1743, 121-123.

14 Texier 1962, 56.

15 Schneider 1943; Schneider-Karnapp 1938, 35.

16 According to archaeological and architectural data, theatre is dated to the beginning of the 2nd cent. AD. (Yalman 1981, 34; Yalman 1992, 377; Yalman 1996, 345).

17 Evans 2005, 171; Kardoruk 2020, 437.

18 Pliny X.39.

19 The ground survey and material analysis carried out in 2016 (Akyol 2016) were contrast with Pliny.

20 The construction elements of the portico and colonnaded galleries were uncovered on both sides of the stage building (Ekin Meriç et al. 2018, 288).

21 Şahin 2013, 5; Abbasoğlu-Delemen 2003, 192; Doğancı 2019, 543.

to complain about corruption in other development projects in the region[22]. At the end of the letters, he requests an architect from the capital to examine and evaluate the problems in the troubled structures within the Bithynia province. The Emperor rejects his request stating that "There must be plenty of architects to advise you, for there is no province which is without some men of experience and skill in that profession, and remember again that it does not save time to send one from Rome, when so many of our architects come to Rome from Greece"[23].

Architectural Form

The north-facing theatre has a unique vaulted substructure, which is rarely found in ancient times, as it was built on a flat area with very large dimensions[24]. The Nicaea Theatre was constructed using the *opus caementicium* (Roman concrete) technique using rubble stone and mortar. According to recent research, the boundaries of the theatre have been determined as 102.32 x 79.04 m (fig. 5). The surfaces of the *scaenae* and *analemma* walls were covered with limestone blocks. There are various symbols of workshops or master builders who processed the stone *in situ* or in quarries such as Deliktaş, İnikli, Ömerli, and Sarıkaya[25]. Many parts were removed from the theatre and used in various buildings as well as the city walls. Therefore, the stage building, orchestra floor, analemma walls, arches, and vaults were subsequently destroyed (fig. 4).

Cavea

In the Roman theatre, the rows are as follows: lower, middle, and upper (*ima, media,* and *summa*) *cavea.* The seating blocks of the theatre were not found *in situ* position and almost all of them were demolished, damaged, or reused in other buildings within the city. Due to recent archaeological excavations, it was understood that we need to revise the information about the theatre from the foundation to the upper gallery[26]. The lower cavea was supported by large trapezoidal vaults, a feature commonly found in major Roman theatres[27], but previously undocumented in Türkiye. It has recently been discovered that the infrastructure consists of seven trapezoidal vaults, followed by ten elevated barrel vaults[28] and four *vomitoria*[29] (fig. 6). All vaults were connected to each other by means of a tunnel, and access to the orchestra was only possible through the central vault. This circulation network is believed to have been actively used during performances.

22 "*the public money and imperial bounty should be ill applied*" (Pliny 40.1).

23 "*Architecti tibi deesse non possunt. Nulla prouincia non et peritos et ingeniosos homines habet; modo ne existimes breuius esse ab urbe mitti, cum ex Graecia etiam ad nos uenire soliti sint*" (Pliny 40.3).

24 Although the size of the theatre was mentioned as 84 x 63 m in previous publications, it was understood that it covers a wider area due to the artefacts discovered in recent excavations (Ekin Meriç et al. 2018, 286).

25 Yalman 1981, 34.

26 Ekin Meriç et al. 2018, 285-300; Ekin Meriç et al 2019, 293-310.

27 Sear 2006, 135; Bieber 1961, 200.

28 It was previously thought to be 12 vaults in the first excavations by Bedri Yalman (Yalman 1981, 31).

29 The vault structures forming the infrastructure and *vomitoria* appearing in the upper cavea could not be distinguished in previous publications. In recent research, it was understood that four of the 14 openings supporting the infrastructure were used for circulation purposes (Ekin Meriç et al. 2018, 295).

The infrastructure was formed by trapezoidal vaults and a double barrel vault system that supports the middle cavea (fig. 7). The outer vaults were added to the middle cavea along with the staircase chases that followed. Based on the archaeological evidence obtained from the excavations, it was understood that the theatre consisted of three parts. The subdivision (*ima cavea*) was reserved for the executives, priests, soldiers, and high-ranking Roman citizens who attended the performances[30]. The lower cavea was separated from the orchestra floor by a deep *conistra*[31] measuring 1.34 m in height. Based on a small number of preserved blocks, it was determined that the seating positions were 0.69 m in depth and 0.39 m in height. Additionally, some of the seating rows are backed in order to be used as *prohedria* (protocol or noble seats) or as a barrier for the *praecinctio* (diazoma). In contrast to the Greco-Roman architectural tradition[32], the plan of the theatre is formed by eight *cunei* (wedge-shaped seating sections) with *scalae*[33] (stairs) between them and 18 rows of seating (figs. 8-9).

The *analemma* is the term attributed to the wide wall that encloses the lower and middle sections of the theatre. The *analemma* wall in Nicaea differs from those of all other Roman theatres. It begins in the orchestra area in a horseshoe shape and, after its halfway point, continues parallel to the stage building (fig. 8) . For this reason, it can be said that it possesses features of both Greek and Roman theatre architecture[34] and has the Anatolian type *cavea* as indicated by Ferrero[35]. The total length of each *analemma* wall is measured as 28.50 m. There are two large openings in the wall, one leading to the orchestra (*additus maximus*) and the other (*vomitorium*) providing direct access to the *precinctio* (fig. 10). Half of the first and eighth *cuneus*, adjacent to the *analemma* wall, were separated as *tribunalia*[36]. The *tribunalia,* an architectural element unique to Roman theatres, is a special section for the director and the city's elders. It can be directly accessed from the stage building via special stairs to the *tribunalia*.

In ancient theatres, a corridor separates the lower and upper cavea (or more) and provides the circulation of the audience. *Precinctio* in the Nicaea theatre is about 1.90 m wide. The transition from the *precinctio* to the seating rows of the middle cavea was possible via five symmetrical steps. Traditionally, the *media cavea* was often reserved for non-governmental plebs, merchants, foreign guests, and retired soldiers[37]. At the Nicaea Theatre, it is believed that the original seating rows of the middle cavea have not yet been found, but they would likely have had similar dimensions to those of the lower cavea. Accordingly, it is possible that there were 19 rows of seats extending up to the upper cavea. The most significant annex structure on

30 Sear 2006, 3.

31 This solution has been introduced to keep the dignitaries away from the violent demonstrations taking place in the orchestra.

32 There are mostly four or six cunei in the western part of the Roman Empire, whereas the number of cunei in the eastern part can be seven, nine, or even eleven (Sear 2006, 2).

33 Vitruvius 5. 6. 3.

34 Vitruvius, 5. 6. 3.

35 Ferrero 1988.

36 The tribunalia are special sections of the town's elders or show directors. In some cases, special groups such as Vestal Virgins were also accommodated in the lodge (Sear 2006, 7).

37 Sear 2006, 2.

the lower cavea is a church dated to the 13th century AD[38]. Similarly, remains of Byzantine adornments belonging to small chapels have also been found in the theatres of Side[39], Kibyra[40], and Hierapolis[41].

In Pliny's letters, it is mentioned that a portico was built over the cavea pit. Excavations carried out in recent years have emphasized that the portico built on the cavea may correspond to the *summa cavea*, which is the third floor of the theatre. This interpretation is based on the fact that architectural evidence of the portico mentioned in the letters was unearthed during the excavations. In Roman theatres, the *summa cavea* was designed for poor people, women, and slaves, and it was only permitted for standing[42]. Three great pillars in average size of 3.70 x 2.60 m and smaller Corinthian capitals, two fascia architraves, height of 0.70 m, with frieze section left undecorated, console geisons with 0.30 m height that could belong to the portico of the upper *cavea*[43] (fig. 11) were discovered. Finally, 28 pillars, averaging 4.90 m from the outer wall, are arranged in parallel to the theatre circle and would have supported the upper *cavea*[44]. Thus, the most important characteristic of all Roman theatres has also been proven in Nicaea. But the question of whether or not the seating positions are in the *summa cavea* has not been ascertained[45]. It is also possible to build only a gallery with columns (*portico/maenianum summum in ligneis*) so that the spectators can watch standing.

Orchestra

The *orchestra* of the Nicaea Theatre is distinct from its contemporary theatres because it has a horseshoe-shaped plan. This indicates that Anatolian culture retained its Hellenistic origins even during the Roman Imperial Period. Therefore, the *orchestra* was larger than the typical semicircular plan, and the *analemma* wall was not parallel to the stage. The *orchestra* has a diameter of 24.22 m and may have once featured rich marble finishes before its destruction. In accordance with the Roman architectural tradition, there is a 1.34 m elevation difference between the *orchestra* and the *cavea*. This formation called *conistra* or *kolymbethra* was designed for gymnastics and gladiatorial performances in the theatre[46]. Access to the *orchestra* was provided from both sides through *additus maximus* for performers while gladiators and animals entered from the central vault beneath the cavea. During the Late Antique Period, a later wall was added to the North of the *orchestra* within the *cavea*. This wall contains numerous spolia blocks including Corinthian capitals from the *scaenae frons*. In the Byzantine Period, theatrical use of the structure ceased, but the orchestra continued to serve religious functions[47], as indicated by the remains of paintings and frescoes on the walls[48].

38 Peschlow 2003, 212; Kardoruk 2022b, 45-46.

39 İzmirligil 2012, 91.

40 Özüdoğru 2018, 39, 16, fig.5

41 Ferrero 1988, 33; Sear 2006, 338, kat. plan 334; Isler 2017, 340.

42 Sear 2006, 2.

43 Karadoruk 2020, 441-442.

44 Öz 2019, 1-10.

45 Ferrero used the term *summa cavea* for the upper portico in the Nicaea theatre (Ferrero 1988, 16).

46 Sear 2006, 7.

47 Ekin Meriç 2019, 353.

48 Yalman 2007, 392.

Stage Building

At the end of the excavations, the entire *scaenae*, measuring 54.15 x 13.16 m, was uncovered (figs. 8, 12). Only the architectural features of the stage building, whose infrastructure plan is preserved, can be interpreted based on the remaining structures. According to this plan, there are three main entrances and four main rooms separated by an aisle. The stage rooms of the theatre, known as *choregia,* were used for storing decorations and costume changes[49]. Additionally, there were eight smaller rooms for service purposes surrounding the main rooms. Among these rooms, those forming the outermost line of the stage building were likely used as *prascaena*. The excavations have not revealed any evidence of a *porticus post scaenum*, which is expected to be located behind the stage building. Because most of the area where the *porticus post scaenum* will be located lies outside the fenced excavation area. If the fenced area is expanded northward in the coming years, more definitive information about the porticus post scaenum may be obtained[50]. It can be considered that the four rooms in the southern part of the stage building form a long and high corridor in connection with each other, because we know of similar examples from theatres such as Aspendos[51]. The excavations have not found any evidence of *porticus post scaenum*, which should be behind the stage building.

There are four niches in the *Scaenae Frons.* A podium 0.97 m high serves as a base for columns in niches and interconnections. Within these niches, high-quality marble slabs with low-relief depictions covered the clothing of gladiators and the weapons they used during performances. Monoblock marble plasters, which are also used as jambs, were placed on either side of the doors. Among the fragments, mythological figures such as Heracles, Perseus, Pegasus, and Eros appear alongside herbal motifs[52]. Some surfaces of the plasters feature ranke decorations as architectural plastic ornaments. Two Corinthian capitals, which belonged to the antae of *scaenae frons* are located inside the later wall in front of the stage. It is difficult to obtain detailed information from these blocks, but they can be dated to the beginning of the 2nd cent. AD[53]. The geison of the *scaenae frons* is surrounded by a console frieze with Medusa heads. Apart from this, information on the decoration of the stage building is obtained from small architectural plastic pieces found in the excavations. Among the fragments are the Corinthian capitals, ranke, anthemion, braid, bay leaf, lesbos kymation, and so on[54]. The diversity of decorative styles highlights the magnificence of the stage building (fig.13). Despite the lack of adequate architectural material, the stage of the Nicaea Theatre is thought to have been at least two stories high[55] and featured a large *pulpitum* (approx. 5.14 m). The *pulpitum*[56], where the theatre plays were exhibited between the stage and orchestra, was made of wooden materials

49 Sear 2006, 9.

50 Kardoruk 2022a, 653.

51 Sear 2006, 135, 366, plan. 383; Bieber 1961, 181, 200; Isler 2017, 114; Boz 2006, 31, pic.41.

52 Yalman 1993, 186.

53 It is similar to the examples of the Art School at Pergamum in the 2nd cent. AD, such as the Red Basilica, the Trajaneum and the Upper Gymnasium (Heilmeyer 1970, 88, 90, 101, taf. 26, 27, 36), especially due to the craftmanship of acanthus leaves.

54 Kardoruk 2022b, 40.

55 Öz-Meriç 2021, 63.

56 Öz 2019, 7.

at the Nicaea Theatre[57]. The hollows on the marble blocks for wooden beams are still visible. Access to the *pulpitum* was provided through the five doors of the stage building, as well as the two passages of the *versurae*. Due to later extensions with different functions built during the Byzantine Period, insufficient information is available regarding the *proscaenum* and the *hyposcaeanum* located beneath the *pulpitum*. Because of its horseshoe-shaped *cavea* and the presence of five doors on the stage, the Nicaea Theatre can be classified as an Anatolian (Asia Minor) type[58] theatre building[59].

Colonnaded Galeries

During the excavations carried out in 2015-2018, the porticos on both sides of the stage building, which were mentioned in Pliny's letters to Emperor Trajan, were unearthed. According to these letters, the theatre was still under construction in 111 AD, and it was on the agenda to accept the porticos next to the stage building by private sponsors. The colonnaded galleries[60] located independently in the east and west directions are a tradition in some important Roman theatres[61]. The galleries are the best-preserved building units when considering the other units of the theatre. Therefore, it was possible to create a realistic impression of both galleries. The square structure with an average size of 11.87 x 11.10 m is supported by 12 Corinthian columns. The column bases were placed in postaments with eight corners and 1.38 m high. Due to the architectural finds, the presence of the second floor in the eastern gallery has become certain[62]. Considering the remains, the second floor, 5.96 m in height, was built on the lower floor of approximately 9.65 m in height (fig. 14-15). The presence of *hermae* in the middle of the parapets between the columns is an unusual situation for theatres (fig. 16). It appears that architectural elements of the second floor were crafted from high-quality marble and exhibit more refined workmanship.

The wall remains unearthed around the galleries during the recent excavations are interesting. Remains of walls with a width of 1.32 m and a door opening of 2.45 m on the outermost line of the stage building were unearthed around the galleries on the east and west. Architectural blocks measuring 1.12 m in width, aligned with the gallery postaments, were placed on this wall at intervals of approximately 2.00 m. The merging of the wall remains with the stage building and being in line with the postaments creates a closed space perception associated with the galleries. The architectural remains in question are outside the archaeological site, which is surrounded by a fence around the eastern and western columned galleries. This place, whose function cannot be clarified, gives the impression of a *basilica*[63] when compared to its

57 Horatius (Horace 2.279) mentions that the pulpit was made of wood plates in the Ars Poetica*; "Aeschylus et modicis instrauit pulpita tignis".*

58 Fiechter 1914, 108.

59 Isler 1994, 121.

60 Kardoruk 2022a, 139-639; Kardoruk 2022b, 36.

61 This section is called *versurae procurrentes* (Vitruvius 5.6.8).

62 Ekin Meriç et al. 2018, 289.

63 Kardoruk 2022b, 36; Kardoruk 2022a, 640-667. These building units, which are located on both sides of the stage building and serve as an entrance hall, are named *Basilica.* For detailed information, see Sear 2006, 221.

contemporary theatres such as; Bostra[64], Leptis Magna[65], Beneventum[66] and Marcellus[67].

Discussion

The ancient city of Nicaea, which was bequeathed to Rome by testament of the Bithynian Kingdom, gained significance in the Roman period. During the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace, 27 BC–AD 180), urban populations in Anatolia grew, and reconstruction and trade activities flourished. Nicaea became the capital of the Bithynian province in the empire and continued its development in terms of political, religious, cultural, social, artistic and architectural aspects. However, due to its location on the North Anatolian Fault Line, the city was frequently damaged by earthquakes[68]. Its rivalry with Nicomedia, the neighboring city from the end of the Hellenistic period, continued in the Roman period as well. The primary reason for this rivalry was the prestige associated with leading ceremonial events, as this signified a city's prominence and respectability[69]. In addition, the festivals in question were considered a demonstration of loyalty to the Roman rule[70]. The construction of the Nicaea Theatre likely began after the great earthquake of AD 34[71] within this competitive environment in the 1st century AD. At the beginning of the 2nd century AD, Pliny the Younger provided crucial information about the development activities of the Bithynian region[72]. The Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138) visited Nicaea[73] and provided financial support for reconstruction of the city[74]. During the first few centuries, Nicaea was destroyed because of earthquakes and enemy attacks, especially the Parthian threat and the Gothic invasion[75]. During periods of instability in the eastern border of the empire, Nicaea became a logistical and strategic center rather than a station of the transition routes of the Roman army.

The Nicaea Theatre is a hybrid structure between Roman and Asia Minor (Anatolian) type theatres because of its architectural features such as vaulted substructure, *cavea* plan with a horseshoe shape, and the presence of five gates in the stage building[76]. A raised substructure is a typical characteristic of Roman theatres. However, an entire *cavea* supported by large vaults rising from the ground is an uncommon feature. Some theatres such as those in Marcellus[77],

64 Segal 1987, 11, Abb. 20-21; Isler 2017, 171; Sear 2006, 308, pl. 288.

65 Small 1983, 57, III.3; Sear 2006, 283, plan 256; Bomgardner 2016, 69, fig.5; Isler 2017, 438.

66 Small 1983, 62, III.7; Iannace-Trematerra 2013, 2, fig. 2; Sear 2006, 143, pl. 36; Isler 2017, 167.

67 Fiechter 1914, Abb. 71; Montanari 2018, 41.3; Fiechter 1964, abb. 71; Parker 1997, 165, fig.4; Isler 2017, 662.

68 Doğancı 2001, 61-66; Doğancı 2015, 119-130; Doğancı 2019, 535-555.

69 Eyice 1988, 5.

70 Bosch 1948, 235.

71 Eusebius 2.148–149.

72 Eyice 1988, 9.

73 Weber 1907, 128.

74 An inscription on the Lefke Gate contains a writing dedicated to Hadrian's support (Şahin-Merkelbach 1987, 13)

75 Kaya 2000, 145; Şahin 1979, taf.17.

76 Isler 1994, 121.

77 Fiechter 1914, abb. 71; Montanari 2018, 41.3; Fiechter 1964, abb. 71; Parker 1997, 165, fig.4; Isler 2017, 662.

Minturnae[78], Beneventum[79] as well as the Theatre of Nicaea exhibit this characteristic. Thus, it is understood that the Theatre of Nicaea is the only structure with this feature in Asia Minor. The Side[80] theatre, which is the most similar to Nicaea, only has the *ima cavea* built against a slope, while other levels rest on a raised substructure.

The second architectural feature is the horseshoe-shaped plan of the *cavea.* Since many Greek theatres in Asia Minor were modernized during the Roman Period, this plan became a customary model. Although the Aizanoi[81], Myra,[82] and Perge[83] theatres were built during the Roman Imperial period, the *cavea* was a horseshoe form and the *scaenae frons* had five entrances[84]. However, the theatres of Aizanoi[85] and Pessinus were combined with a circus and their *scaenae frons* was designed in Corinthian and Composite orders[86]. During the Roman reconstruction period (1st century AD), *scaenae frons* of the theatres at Ephesus[87] and Hierapolis[88] *were* expanded and redesigned with five doorways[89].

The other unique architectural features of the theatre at Nicaea include the *scaenae frons* plan, its connection with Nemesis, and a shortcut to the *orchestra*. The *scaenae frons* at Nicaea has a straight wall, similar to Aspendus, in contrast to African theatres and many others[90]. The *scaenae frons* of the theatre of Herodes Atticus at Athens featured four niches and three entrances to the stage building[91]. Similarly, the theatre at Lugdunum[92] like many Roman theatres, had three entrances leading to the *scaenae*, accompanied by larger niches[93]. The Hadrianic *scaenae frons* at Stobi[94] in Macedonia was connected with a shrine of Nemesis[95]. A central vaulted entrance leading into the *orchestra* is a rare feature, observed only at Gabala[96] and Ostia[97] during the Severan Period[98].

78 Sear 2006, 125, pl.14; Isler 2017, 500.

79 Isler 2017, 162-163, 205, 500, 658; Small 1983, 62, III.7; Iannace-Trematerra 2013, 2, fig. 2; Sear 2006, 143, pl. 36.

80 Uçar 2001, 218, fig. 1; Öztekin 2017, 23; Isler 2017, 705; Sear 2006, 377, pl. 401.

81 Özer-Korkmaz 2014, 298, şek. 5; Sear 2006, 325, pl. 316.

82 Özdilek 2011, 382, kat. plan.18; Sear 2006, 370, pl. 389.

83 Sear 2006, 372, kat. pl. 392.

84 Sear 2006, 325, 370, 373 pl. 316, 389, 392.

85 Özer-Korkmaz 2014, 298, şek. 5; Sear 2006, 325, plan. 316.

86 Durm 1881, 215, 229; Bieber 1961, 220.

87 Styler-Aydın, 2022, taf. 5; Krinzinger-Ruggendorfer 2017, taf.12.

88 Sobra 2012, 187, fig. 5, 9, 10.

89 Sear 2006, 335, 338 pl. 329, 334.

90 Bieber 1961, 208; Isler 2017, 114.

91 Bieber 1961, 211; Isler 2017, 130.

92 Sear 2006, 202-203, pl.131; Isler 2017, 457.

93 Sear 2006, 236, pl.190; Isler 2017, 453.

94 Gebhard 2012, 331, fig.6; Sear 2006, 419, pl. 445; Isler 2017, 730.

95 Bieber 1961, 127.

96 Sear 2006, 320-321, pl. 308.

97 Isler 2017, 556; Sear 129, pl. 19.

98 Bieber 1961, 191; Isler 2017, 556.

Conclusions

Nicaea and its surroundings have been inhabited continuously from the Prehistoric Period to the end of the Ottoman Period. It has been chosen by people for thousands of years because of its fertile plain and livable climate due to its proximity to Lake Iznik. But the attractiveness of this region has brought many attacks, sieges, and warfare. On the other hand, the city also faced many earthquakes because the region is located on the North Anatolian Fault Line. The Roman Theatre of Nicaea has a different, unique position in Turkey and even among ancient theatres in the world due to two important features. First, the theatre is one of the rare structures to provide information about the date of construction and architectural features given by an ancient writer. Pliny the Younger, who served as governor in the Bithynia region in AD 111, wrote letters about Nicaea city and the theatre. The second important feature of building is an unusual infrastructure that was constructed entirely on flat land and completely built up with vaults (fig.17). The utilization of the inside of trapezoidal vaults in the lower *cavea* is unique among the ancient theatres of Turkey.

In light of the present data and findings, it is assumed that the theatre consisted of three *cavea*, with a maximum size of 102 x 79 m, a height of 24 m, and an estimated capacity of 10,000 spectators. The auditorium building was elevated by seven trapezoidal and 10 crescent vaults, which are rarely seen in the antiquity of Turkey. It is thought to be a portico instead of the seating rows in the upper *cavea,* which is peculiar to the Roman theatres. The *scaenae frons* is at least two floors above the *proscaenium* and it is understood that this episode was designed in the Corinthian and Composite orders. The colonnaded galleries on each side constitute the most revealing part of the theatre, owing to the uncovered architectural materials and archaeological findings.

As a result of the theatre excavations, it is understood that the Roman theatre was built on a Hellenistic settlement[99]. Despite the loss of function in the Late Roman Period (4th century AD), the theatre was used for different purposes in the Byzantine and Ottoman Periods. The building, which carries all the traces of important events or developments in the city of Nicaea, gives the impression of an open-air museum of the history of Iznik[100].

The everchanging reconstruction activities were planned for centuries in the city and blocks were reclaimed for the construction of new buildings. Therefore, irreparable destruction occurred on the buildings as well as other structures of the city. While the arches, vaults and stands of the structure were well preserved, a small number of in-situ blocks belonging to the *cavea* and the stage building were recovered. In the scope of the excavation and restoration studies, 1318 architectural blocks were numbered and studied. Among these blocks, 440 item of the architectural blocks are profiled and a few of them can be determined on the structure. However, the vast majority of these blocks belong to the colonnaded galleries, which are built independently and later from the theatre. Furthermore, 1016 architectural pieces that were cut off or shaved from these blocks were examined. The vast majority of these small fragments were found to belong to the *scaena frons.*

99 Ekin Meriç 2018, 85-122.

100 Kardoruk 2022b, 31-62.

Finally; The recording, Restitution (fig.17) and Restoration Project of the Roman Theatre at Nicaea was prepared in order to protect the multi-layered character, prevent physical destruction and transfer to the future generations in accordance with conservation principles.

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Writer Contributions/Yazar Katkıları

Planning of the Study/Çalışmanın Tasarlanması	Author/Yazar-1 (%50) - Author/Yazar-2 (%50)
Collecting Data/Veri Toplanması	Author/Yazar-1 (%50) - Author/Yazar-2 (%50)
Data Analysis/Veri Analizi	Author/Yazar-1 (%50) - Author/Yazar-2 (%50)
Writing the Article/Makalenin Yazımı	Author/Yazar-1 (%50) - Author/Yazar-2 (%50)
Submission of the Article and Revisions/ Makale Gönderimi ve Revizyonu	Author/Yazar-1 (%50) - Author/Yazar-2 (%50)

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest./Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

ETHICAL STATEMENT/ETİK BEYAN

It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were complied with during the preparation of this study and all the works referred are mentioned in the bibliography./Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Map of the Bithynia Region (drawing A. K. Öz 2018)

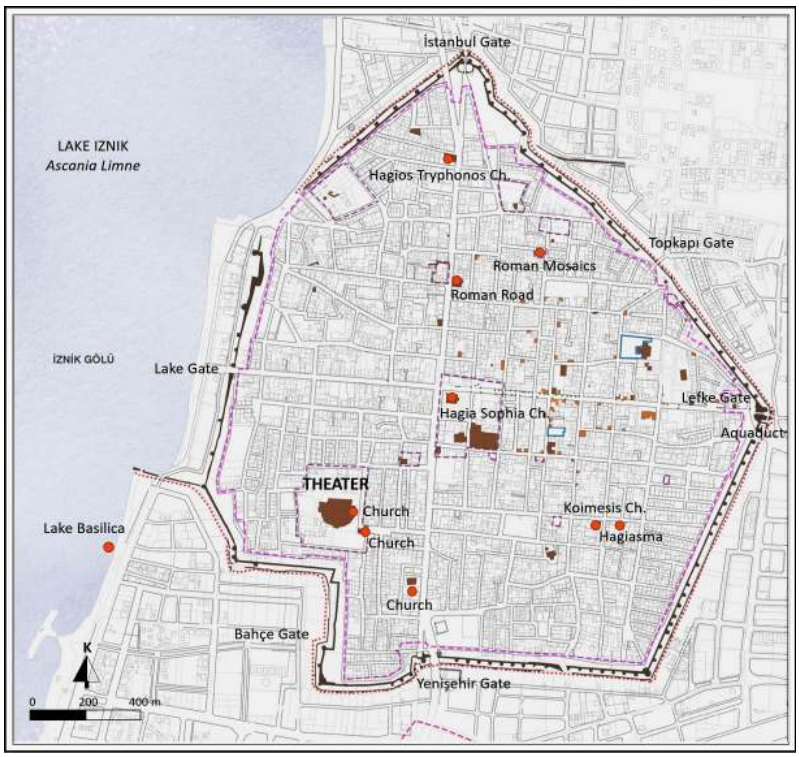


Fig. 2. Map of Nicaea (drawing A. K. Öz 2018)



Fig. 3. General view of theatre (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2021)



Fig. 4. Remains of cavea and west analemma (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2019)

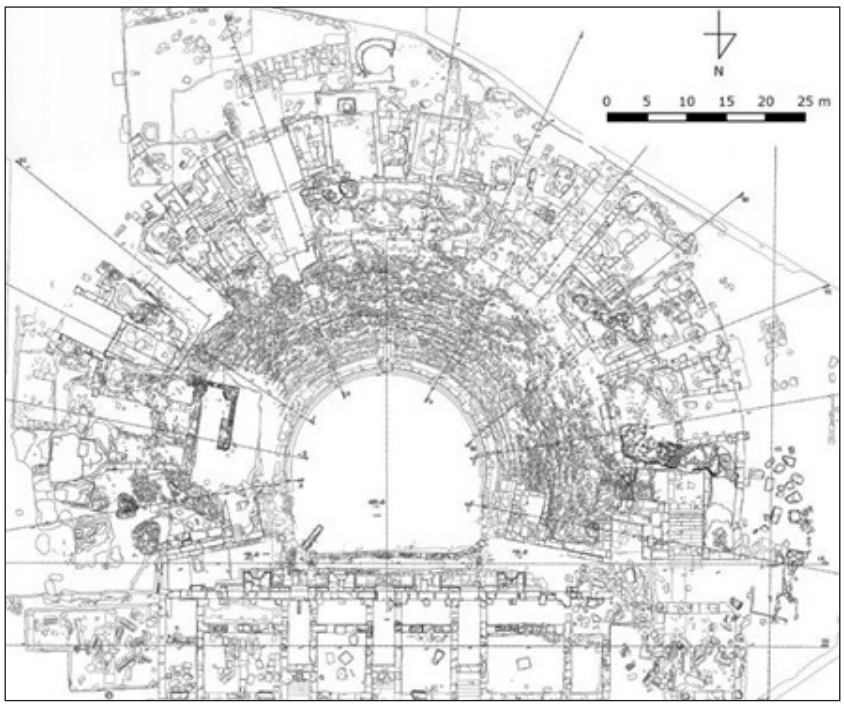


Fig. 5. General plan of theatre (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2017)

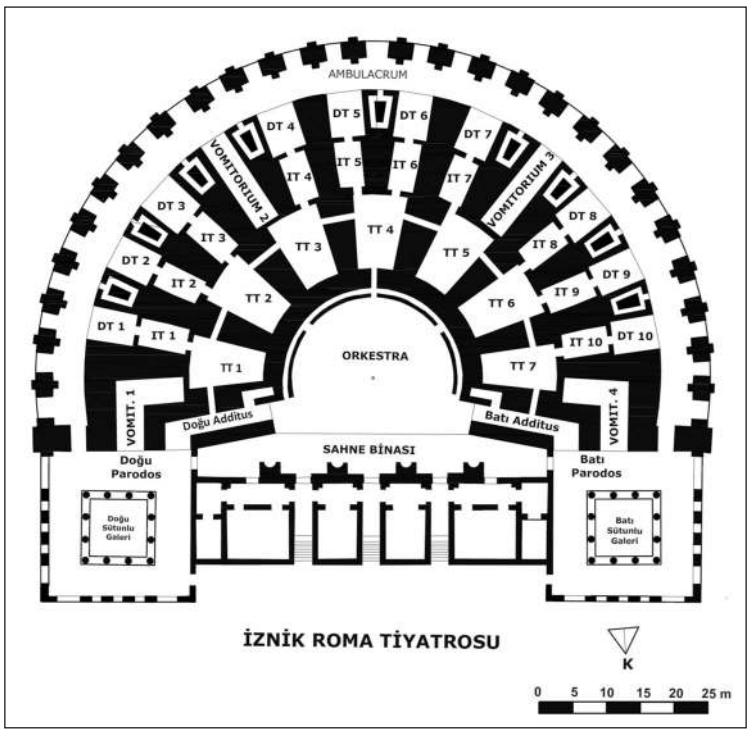


Fig. 6. Infrastructural plan of theatre (drawing A. K. Öz 2018)



Fig. 7. Imposing vaulted infrastructure of cavea (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2020)

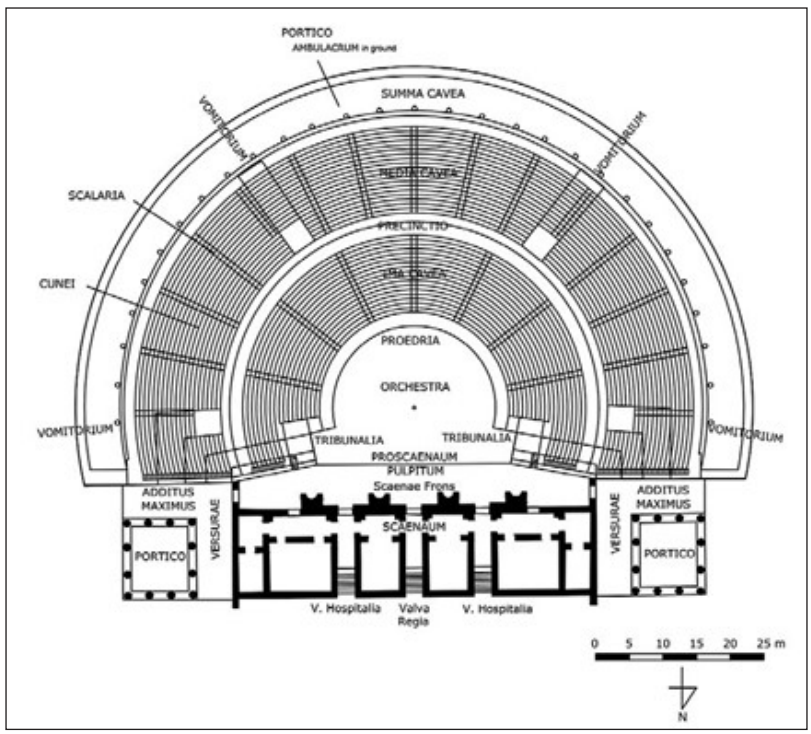


Fig. 8. Illustrated plan of theatre (drawing A.K. Öz, 2018)

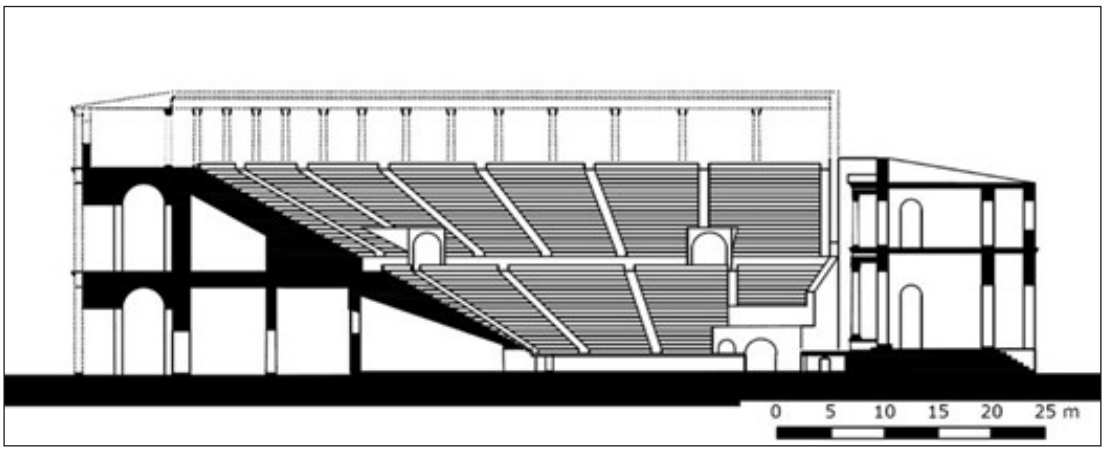


Fig. 9. Illustrated section of the theatre (drawing A.K. Öz, 2018)



Fig. 10. Blocks of the west portico and vomitorium (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2020)



Fig. 11. Fallen blocks from the portico of upper cavea (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2020)



Fig. 12. View from scaenae to cavea (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2020)



Fig. 13. Architectural fragments of stage building (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2020)

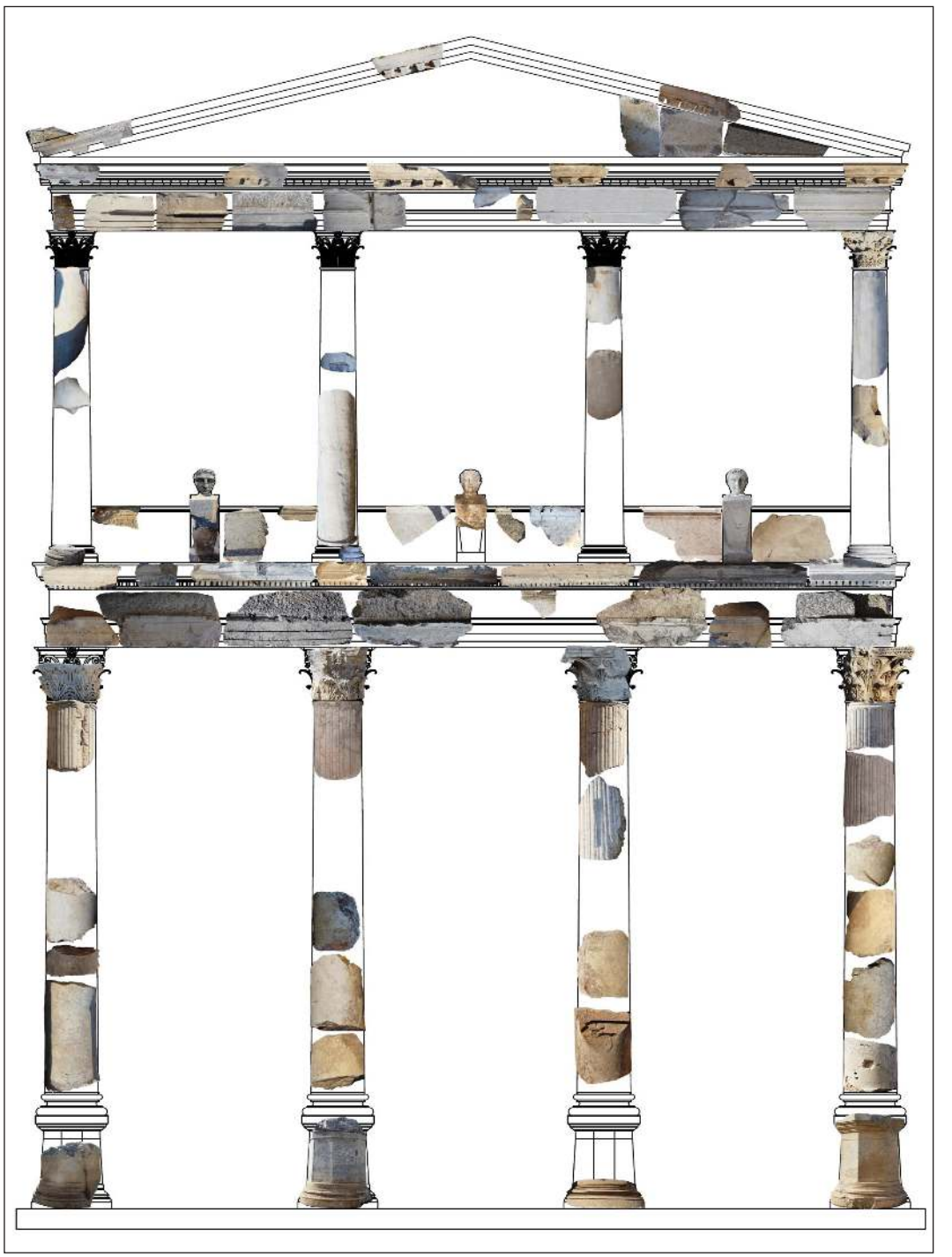


Fig. 14. Illustrated view of east portico (drawing A.K. Öz, 2018)



Fig. 15. Reconstruction of west portico (drawing F. H. Kaya; V. C. Caner, 2016)



Fig. 16. Hermae in east portico (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2017)



Fig. 17. Possible reconstruction of theatre (courtesy of the Roman Theatre Excavation at Nicaea 2021)