

Aquileia: Problems about the Theatre. Contributions of the New Technologies

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Abstract. The archaeologists have debated over a century and a half about the localization of the Aquileia theatre. Luisa Bertacchi places it as her latest proposal at the *Fondo Comelli*; however, no apparent traces of a theatre were found there. Some of its parts were obviously removed, but nothing remains of a large building which was still visible during the 13th and 14th centuries. Aerial photographs seem to show traces South of the proposed site. I guess that the new technologies can help to localize it.

Keywords: Aquileia, Roman theatre, Supposed localisation, Research by new technologies.

1 Introduction

Aquileia, like Altino, must have had one or more theatres, and at least an *Odeon*. The medieval name ‘Zadris’, often mentioned¹, suggests that even in the 13th century some of the surviving ruins (of two buildings?) were visible. The “Via publica de Zadris” ran close to the “Hospitale S. Helari” and “Rena”, N of the amphitheatre, where even today runs the public road (Figs. 1a, 1b).

The problem of identifying the Aquileia’s theatre has been debated over a century and a half. The Austrian excavators in the Seventies of the 19th century believed to locate it at the curved side of the building after recognized as a circus².

¹ VALE 1931, 16-17 (year 1223); PERUSINI 1953-54 (year 1322); SCALON 1982, 160, 269, 286 (year 1297), 297 (year 1372). It’s rich the subsequent literature, within which we quote BERTACCHI 1994; BERTACCHI 1995; BASSO 199, 177; BASSO 2004.

² KENNER, HAUSER, 1875.

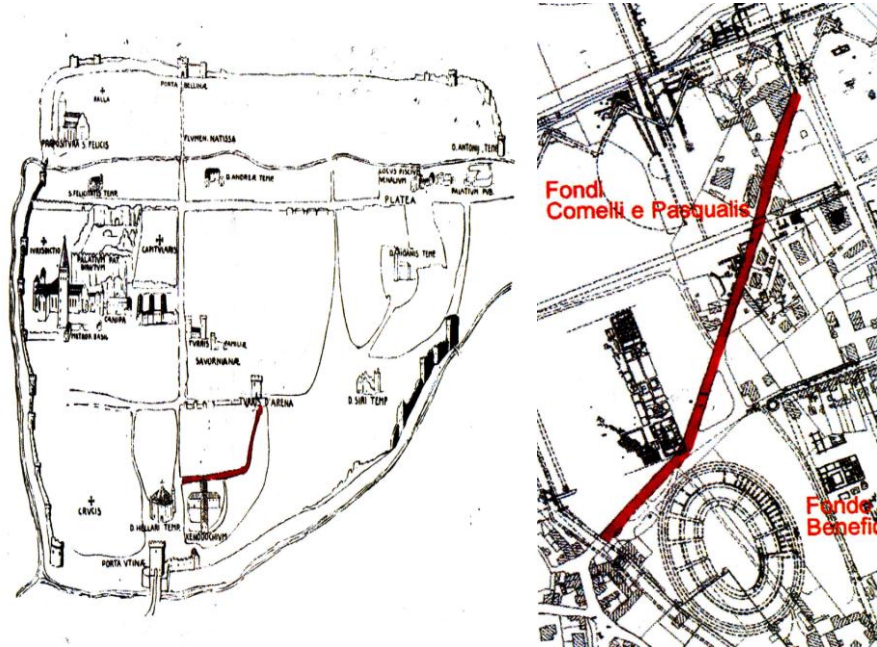


Fig. 1. a) Drawing of the year 1735 from a view of Aquileia in 1693 (after BRUSIN 1934); N is down. b) Archaeological map of Aquileia (after GHEDINI, BUENO, NOVELLO 2009); N is up. Marked in red are the medieval “via publica de Zadriss” and the modern road.

2 Investigations by Luisa Bertacchi

Luisa Bertacchi was concerned until her last days to identify the site of the Aquileia’s theatre. She wrote “...roughly twenty years ago (ca. 1964), with the aid of aerial photographs, the site NE of the amphitheatre was hypothesized. Further indications came a few years later during the excavation works for sewers: S of the circus and close to the archaeological museum. More recently, prospections were ordered to the Lericì Foundation at NE of the Great Baths (i.e., at *Fondo Comelli*): the latter investigations appeared quite promising”³.

On the Aquileia’s map, published in 2003, at the W wall of the 4th and 5th centuries, in the so-called “area Mottaron” (Monton in the Middle Ages and in modern times also Montaron) it appears N of the medieval *Roggia del Molino* a semicircle suggesting a *cavea* of a theatre or an *odeon* (Fig. 2).

³ BERTACCHI 1984, 264.

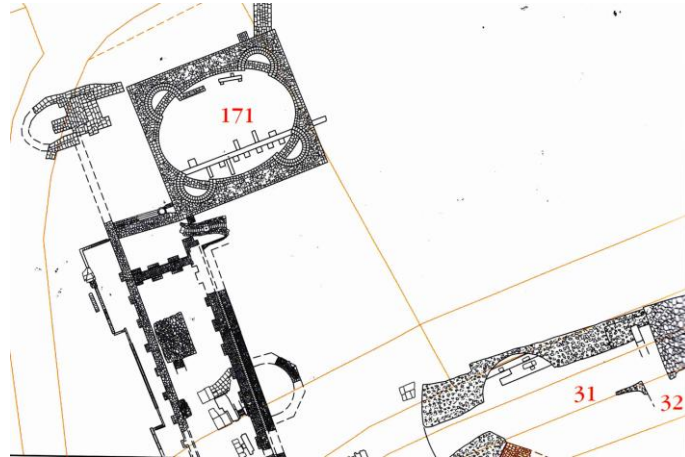


Fig. 2. Bottom right a supposed theatre (after BERTACCHI 2003).

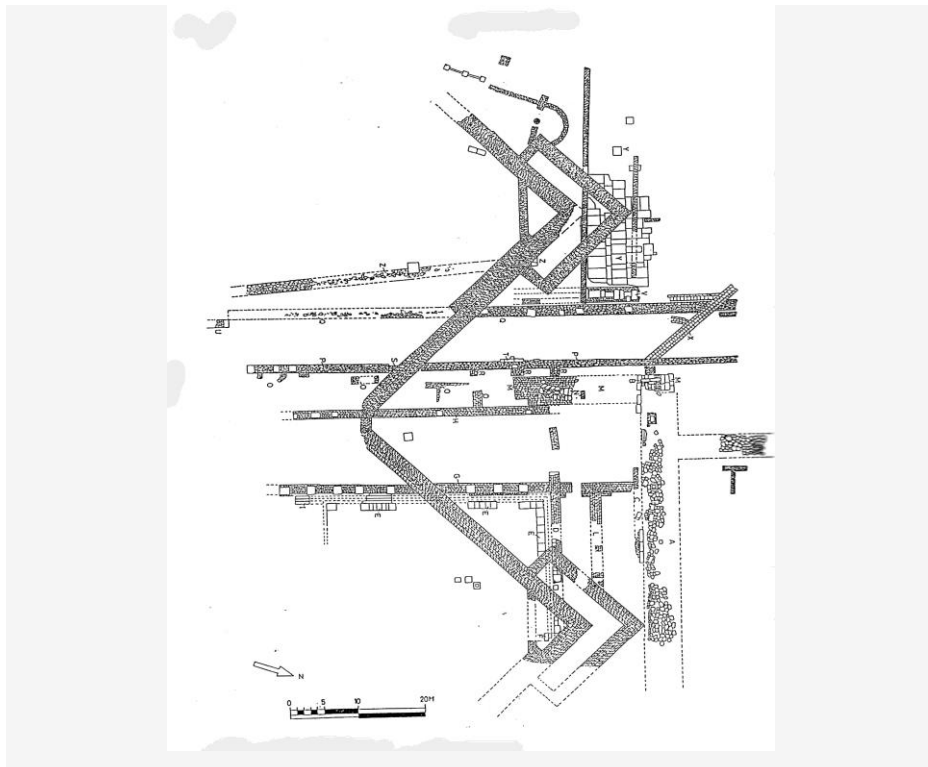


Fig. 3. Map of the excavations at fondo Comelli (after BERTACCHI 1995).

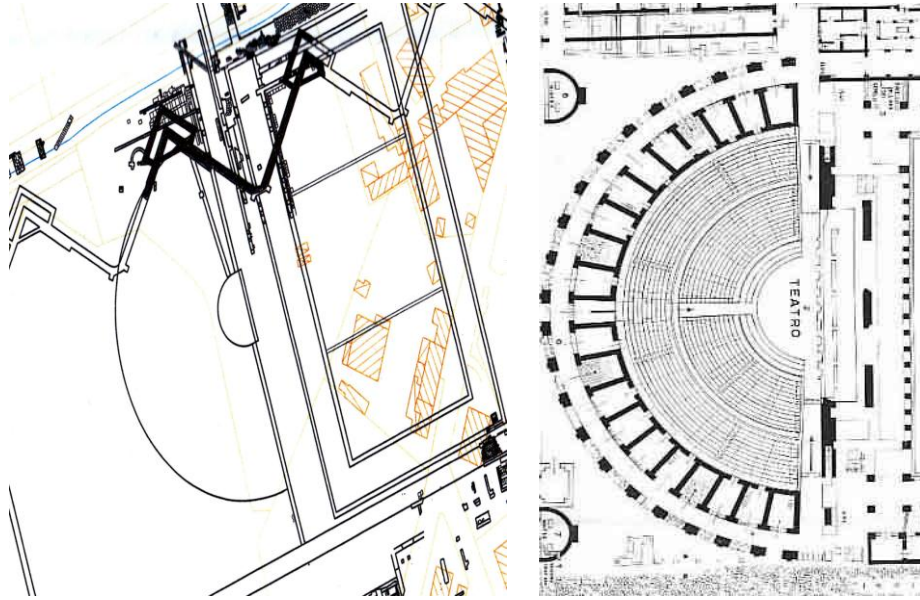


Fig. 4. a) Theatre of Aquileia (after BERTACCHI 2003); b) The theatre in Ostia.

At the time of the excavations at *fondo Comelli*, that she directed more than forty years ago, it was not clear that there could be a theatre; in fact, in 1984 the same Scholar published a little note in which she proposed to locate the building in the area opposite to the archaeological museum, northwards⁴. Later, since 1990, with a brilliant guess placed it within the *fondo Comelli* (Fig.3). According to her reconstruction, the settlement of the theatre (Fig.4a) would closely resemble the one in Ostia (Fig.4b).

3 Opposite evidences

However, there remain elements of uncertainty. We should imagine that the theatre underwent roughly the same chronological phases found elsewhere in Aquileia, namely: an early building in the advanced 1st c. BC (perhaps in the Augustan age); restorations and embellishments at the beginning of the 2nd c. AD, especially in Severian period, with possible enlargements; finally, renovations and restorations at the end of the 4th c., perhaps in the Theodosian age, unless there was a phase of abandonment/destruction during the 4th c.

⁴ BERTACCHI 1984.

In particular, it should be observed that the foundations of the scene (pulpit and stage) and the *cavea* are totally missing (fig.5). Another observation is that, if the scene were placed between porch and *cavea*, as in Gortyn, the space devoted to the scene would be too small in width, which is in contrast to the remarkable development in depth observed on the theatres of the Augustan age. Moreover, we cannot say that the double colonnade, enclosing a quadrangular space close to the first *decumanus* S of the city - known as Aratria Galla's *decumanus* - coincides with the *porticus duplex*.



Fig. 5. Aerial photo of *Fondo Comelli* in the Seventies of the last century.

attested by an inscription of the Republican age⁵. The text (within the early 1st c. BC, according to Bandelli) and the possible construction of the complex (only after partial removal of the republican wall, in the Augustan age) have different datings. The double porch visible today has Ionic columns, rather massive ones made of imported marble, while the Republican *porticus duplex* should have Doric columns.

The hypothetical presence of a *cavea* is suggested by a gap in the wall: a comparison with the plan of the theatre in Ostia reveals that there is nothing alike - given that the *cavea*'s limit stops at the *orchestra* - and the same *cavea*, at least in its current form, is less deep. All structures of the third *menian*, which had to be supported by strong pillars, are absent.

⁵ CIL V, 1021; I.A., 77.

Not everything (i.e., the theatre) was dismantled in the mid 6th c., at the time of construction of the zig-zag walls: in fact, below them are still remains from late antiquity (e.g., the *domus* located W). Of course, the Ionic columns of the quadrangular porch were removed, but not completely. In place is still a drum that had been cut only partially.

The location of late antique house at the NW corner shows that the size assumed for the theatre is too large.

The long walls seen as pertinent to the *orchestra* and *cavea* continue N through the theatre itself and cut the continuation of the Aratria Galla *decumanus*, demonstrating that are independent of the hypothesized theatre. The bases of pillars continue even at the hypothetical building annex to the theatre which Bertacchi called '*basilica*'.

The eventual location of a theatre in this area – or one of the city's theatres - arises problems of town planning. In fact, the only entrance known comes from the road running along the W Republican wall. It gives direct access to the W side of the porch and not to the *parodos* of the theatre, as one would expect.

The W building was identified by Luisa Bertacchi with a *basilica* or a structure attached to the theatre, as one of those mentioned on the inscription from Gubbio⁶, on which appears the expression "basilicas sublaqueavit". It was also read as "he had decorated 'a cassettoni' the arcades." In our case, a limestone has been brought to light on which arose two parallel brick walls, that perhaps connect another perpendicular wall. The S wall was cut during construction of the triangular (or *zig-zag*) walls, then we can assume that the original one was still standing until the 6th c. Perhaps it was another public building (*horrea?*) connected to the river port nearby.



Fig. 6. Rectangular base from the theatre in the W wall of the Baptistery (the Author, 2012).

⁶ CIL XI, 5820.

We know that the theatre was gradually demolished, perhaps starting from the first half of the 5th c., as evidenced by migration of many inscribed seats: one of them arrived at the Basilica of Monastero. It might have served as a quarry even later, at least by looking at a rectangular base inserted into the outer wall of the Baptistery of Aquileia.

The Byzantine fortifications of the mid-6th c. demolished structures bearing directly onto the porch, without any trace of the enormous amounts of materials that had to be the complex with annexes. It is true that the circus was largely dismantled as well, but at least some of its foundations are still recognizable on aerial photos. Further, detailed observations concerning some walls; the presence of a residential dwelling of late antiquity, as well as other elements, lead to doubt of the identification with a theatre of the structures found. Luisa Bertacchi writes that in the area were no in-depth excavations, and we guess that she could not observe any spoliation pits of radial walls, nor other impressive structures. It was lapped by the *decumanus* of Aratria Galla: the latter ran sideways, over the late Republican fortification wall toward the Amphora canal – then, it did not come directly to the building.

4 New perspectives

As pointed out by Luisa Bertacchi, already 50 years ago the aerial photographs suggested the possibility that the theatre is located NE of the amphitheatre, whose location is undisputed.

Subsequently, technologies used by researchers of the Lerici Foundation of the Milan Polytechnic brought to recognize, at the *fondo Comelli*, a series of parallel alignments that the excavations indeed highlighted. However, nothing from these investigations is attributable with certainty to a theatre.

Aerial photographs of the middle last c. (Fig.7a) and more recent ones (Fig.7b), seem to indicate the presence of massive semi-circular underground structures placed just S of the excavated parts of the *Fondo Comelli*. Remembering the medieval toponyms, it does not seem dubious the presence in this area of one or more theatres (ie., amphitheatre and theatre), close to a road that started from the Udine gate (*porta Utini*) in the 11th c. and not by the Byzantine gate, maybe then transformed into the *memoria* of St. Hilary.

Aerial photographs show a curve that may be guessed to be a *cavea*. If this is true, the theatre would have been smaller than supposed. It does not seem acceptable as a possible location of the (main?) theatre of Aquileia. Archaeological investigations in the area are not expected in a short time. The new technologies are likely to solve the problem. I think that a careful investigation there with GPR, LIDAR or other technologies will provide us with valuable information.



Fig. 7. a) *Fondo Comelli* (aerial photo 1950's). b) The same by Google Earth 2006.

5 Conclusions

The study of medieval topography allows to identify the medieval “Via de Zadris” with the current route; it ran through the amphitheatre, which was S, and a theatre, which consequently was settled N. The excavations carried out at the *fondo Comelli* do not clearly indicate the presence of a theatre. It could be situated S, as one would guess from the aerial photos.

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