

1 Introduction

1.1 Brief history of the research

Despite its monumental scale, the theatre of ancient Messene has long been neglected by scholars. One possible reason for this neglect might be related to the quarrying of the seating blocks for the neighbouring Arsinoe Fountain and basilica church that started in Late Antiquity. When Pausanias visited the monumental theatre of ancient Messene, he said: »... and not far from the theatre, there is the sanctuary of Serapis and Isis«¹. This detail is also indirectly mentioned by Plutarch, who was writing at a time when the theatre was in use². Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether Pausanias's intention was to refer to the *ekklesiasterion* of the Asklepieion, sometimes also called the ›Small Theatre‹, which is located to the south of the agora³.

Early modern investigations at Messene were conducted by French travellers and reported in the early nineteenth century »Expédition scientifique de Morée«⁴. The French mission undertook a general investigation of the city, including a quick survey of monuments such as the Asklepieion, the theatre, the stadium, and the monumental Arcadian Gate⁵. The theatre was drawn in the city plan roughly in the correct position. Some sketches of the theatre were published, including the stepped entrance of the outer wall of the auditorium and a pair of architectural blocks (fig. 1)⁶. However, the German travellers who followed misinterpreted a ca. 60 m long and ca. 3 m high wall of the theatre as belonging to another building⁷.

In 1895, the Archaeological Service of Athens began the systematic excavation of Messene. The first excavations were conducted by Georgios Oikonomos in 1909 and 1925. Anastasios Orlandos, then General Secretary of the Archaeological Service at Athens, led the excavations from 1958 to 1974. None of these excavations focused on the theatre.

In 1986, the excavation of the theatre began with Prof. Petros Themelis, head of the Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies. Initial systematic excavations started in 1996 in the southern part of the east lateral entrance to the orchestra (*parodos*), and continued from 1998 to 2001 with the west *parodos*, the orchestra, the scene building and the west part of the auditorium (*koilon/cavea*); parts of these areas were restored. The lower and upper parts of the auditorium (the *theatron* and the *epitheatron*, or the *ima* and the *summa cavea*), the orchestra and the retaining walls (*analemmata*) of the auditorium were restored by Themelis between 2007 and 2012. From 2007 to 2016, the author and the Architectural Team of Kumamoto University conducted fieldwork at Messene.

During the excavation of the theatre, from 1986 until 2010, annual reports and occasional interim reports were published by Themelis⁸. Some short reports and notices on the research taking place in Messene mentioned the theatre⁹, and several authors have since written brief reports and preliminary studies on the theatre¹⁰.

¹ Paus. 4, 32, 6 (edition Jones – Ormerod 1926).

² Plu. Arat. 49.

³ For the *ekklesiasterion/odeum* of the Asklepieion at Messene, see Birtachas 2008; Hayashida et al. 2013, 4f.

⁴ Blouet et al. 1831, 23–51 pls. 18–47.

⁵ Blouet et al. 1831, fig. 22 k.

⁶ Blouet et al. 1831, pls. 36, 1. 2. 5. 6; 37, 5. 6.

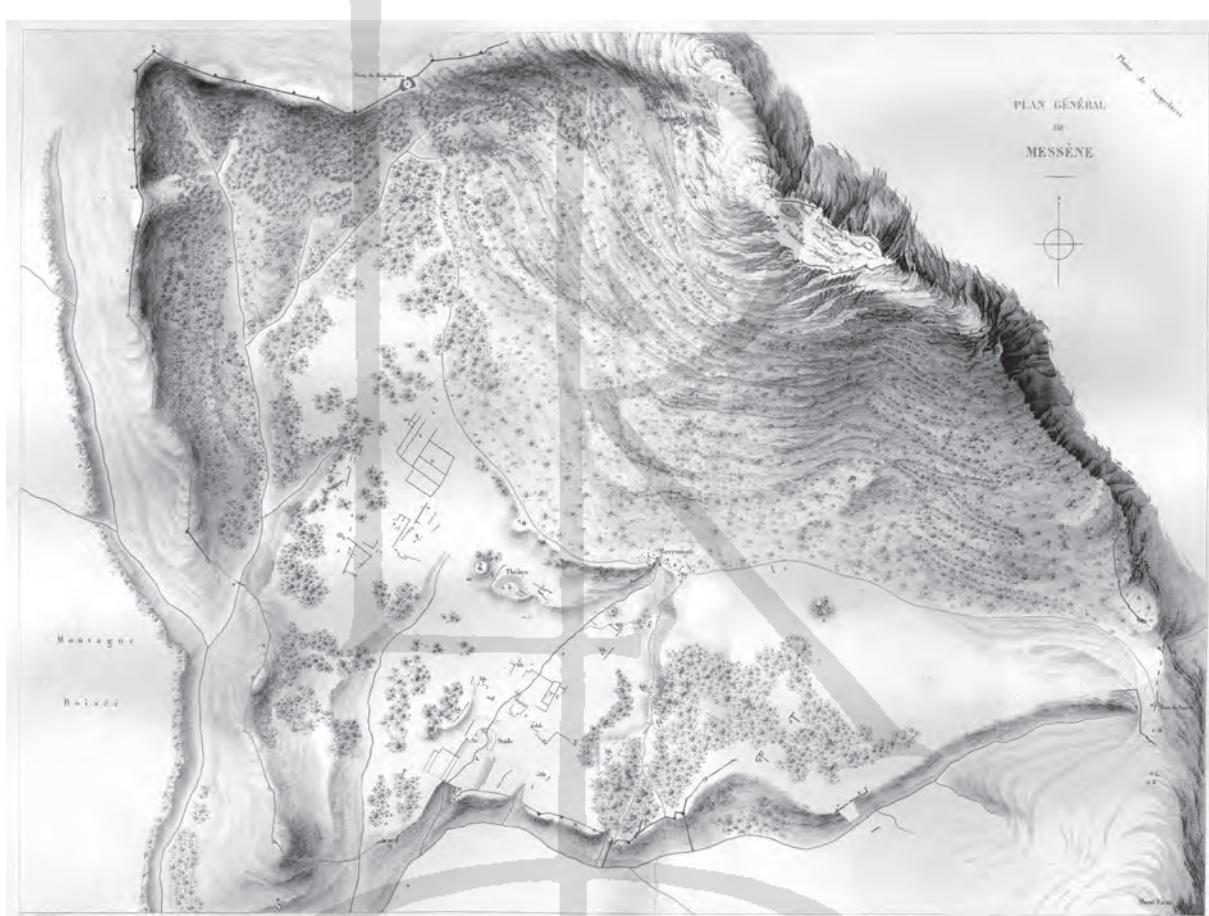
⁷ Curtius 1851/1852, 123–129. 291–293; Vischer 1857, 447 f.; Bae-deker 1908, 273–305. 341–354.

⁸ Themelis 1986a, 103; Themelis 1986b, 78; Themelis 1987a, 98; Themelis 1987b, 73; Themelis 1988a, 30; Themelis 1988b, 45–52; Themelis 1989a, 35; Themelis 1989b, 91 f.; Themelis 1994; Themelis 1996a, 50–52; Themelis 1996b, 153–156; Themelis 1997a, 36; Themelis 1997b, 85–89; Themelis 1998a, 41–43; Themelis 1998b, 102–106; Themelis 1998c, 10 f. plan 1 fig. 7; Themelis 1999a, 47;

Themelis 1999b, 76–81; Themelis 2000a, 58–61; Themelis 2000b, 76–82; Themelis 2001a, 46–49; Themelis 2001b, 64–70; Themelis 2002a, 27–30; Themelis 2002b, 22–33; Themelis 2003a, 30–32; Themelis 2003b, 26–28; Themelis 2003c, 51 f. figs. 18. 19. 32; Themelis 2004a, 24; Themelis 2004b, 28 f.; Themelis 2005a, 41–44; Themelis 2005b, 39–48; Themelis 2006a, 39–41; Themelis 2006b, 23–43; Themelis 2007a, 42–46; Themelis 2007b, 24–28; Themelis 2008a, 46–52; Themelis 2008b, 33–37; Themelis 2009a, 42–46; Themelis 2009b, 62–69; Themelis 2010a, 29–32; Themelis 2010b, 53–58; Themelis 2010c; Themelis 2010d, 125; Themelis 2012; Themelis 2014, 49–63 figs. 19–41; Themelis 2015a; Themelis 2015b.

⁹ Sear 2006, 41. 45. 94. 401 f.; Müth 2007, 79–89; Spawforth 2012, 211–217.

¹⁰ Iwata et al. 2012; Yoshitake 2013b; Yoshitake 2013c; Yoshitake 2016b; Yoshitake 2019; Yoshitake – Yamazato 2019.



1 City plan of Messene, 1831

1.2 Objectives, organisation and methodology of the research

1.2.1 Objectives

The first objective of this study is to record the newly excavated theatre building by documenting the surviving architectural remains. The existing structures of the theatre are described in detail and illustrated by stone-by-stone line drawings, the architectural members that originally belonged to the theatre are catalogued, and all the well-preserved pieces are illustrated by photographs and line drawings.

The second objective is to propose a reconstruction of the theatre based on a careful examination of the extant architectural remains. Because a large number of architectural blocks were reused in later periods and only a limited number of blocks of the superstructure have survived, the reconstructions include hypothetical propositions and are in part based on comparisons with buildings contemporary

to the theatre of Messene. Naturally, the degree of reliability of each reconstruction depends on the survival rate of the remains.

The third objective is to analyse the architectural ornamentation of the *scaenae frons* of the Roman scene building and to date its construction. Comparisons with architectural ornaments of the same period may provide us with a date for the construction of the scene building.

The fourth objective is to document the remains of the theatre and to determine how the different elements of the theatre may have functioned. The *skenothike*, the mobile stage (*skene*), the canvas roof (*velum*) and the stage curtain (*aulaeum*) are all accompanied by detailed illustrations and photographs. Their presumed original form and function are reconstructed based on literary sources and comparisons with contemporary examples.

The fifth objective is to examine the constructional aspects of the Messene theatre, including the building materials and techniques, the craftsmanship, the design, and the masons' marks.

The sixth and final objective is to propose a chronology for each building phase from the Late Classical to the Late Roman period. Since the theatre building was one of the largest monuments of the ancient city, its building phases will be considered alongside the construction of other major public buildings in the city.

1.2.2 Organisation

The monograph is organised as follows. The location and remains of the theatre are presented in Chapter 2. The theatre at Messene consists of three parts: the round orchestra, the horseshoe-shaped auditorium, and the scene building. The architectural blocks of the superstructure of the theatre, discovered during excavations and in neighbouring ancient buildings, are presented in Chapter 3. The *skenothekē*, the large storage room for the mobile scenery, is discussed in Chapter 4. In addition, the function of the grooves in the floor of the building is described, and a reconstruction of the mobile stage is proposed. In Chapter 5, the reconstruction of the Hellenistic theatre is discussed, and the form of the Hellenistic scene building is reconstructed based on the construction materials found reused in later structures. In the Roman period, the theatre was adapted to the Roman fashion with the addition of a *scaenae frons*; these modifications are discussed in Chapter 6. The architectural ornamentation of the *scaenae frons* is studied in Chapter 7, which aims at providing a precise date for the Roman scene building. Two architectural features, the canvas roof (*velum*) and the stage curtain (*aulaeum*), are discussed in detail in Chapter 8. The building materials, construction techniques, design, and masons' marks are analysed in Chapter 9. The building phases of the the-

atre are reconstructed in Chapter 10. Finally, the architectural significance of the Messene theatre, including the Hellenistic stone scene building, the mobile stage (*skene*) with its storage building (*skenothekē*), and the Roman *scaenae frons*, is addressed in Chapter 11.

1.2.3 Methodology

The Architectural Team of Kumamoto University started its research in Messene in 2007, and the survey of the theatre began in 2008. Campaigns were conducted for about two months every summer until 2010; then, from 2011 until 2016, the data collected were sorted and analysed, the descriptions written, and the graphic documentation generated. The in-situ architectural remains of the theatre and of the pedestals of the *scaenae frons*, which are housed in the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Messene, were also drawn and recorded.

Since the measuring and recording methods used to collect data affect the reliability of the data and could also be a reference for other studies, we think it is necessary to present them in detail. On-site measurements were taken to create drawings of the elevation and vertical cross-sections of the theatre and the scene building, as well as drawings of major architectural blocks; both traditional manual measurement methods and digital photogrammetry were used. Specifically, in order to draw the plans of the remains, a total station was used to measure all the corners of each individual block of the theatre. Eslon tape measures, carpenter's squares, and plumb lines were then used to measure the offset from baseline and create a plan at a 1:50 scale. For the vertical cross-sections and elevations, digital photogrammetry was used to create orthographic images. The blocks excavated near the theatre were measured using metal tape measures, carpenter's squares, and straight rulers, and were drawn at a 1:10 or 1:5 scale.